This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07604764 0

NBO
Reeve

THE MYSTERY MIND

Supreme Pictures, Inc. *The Mystery Mind*
A SCENE FROM THE PHOTOPLAY STARRING J. ROBERT PAULINE

THE MYSTERY MIND

By

ARTHUR B. REEVE

AND

JOHN W. GREY

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRODUCTIONS TAKEN FROM THE SERIAL OF THE SAME NAME STARRING

J. ROBERT PAULINE

The Famous Hypnotist

Produced by

SUPREME PICTURES, INC.

And released by

PIONEER FILM CORPORATION

Novelization by

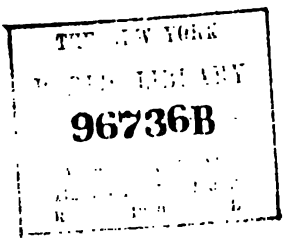
MARC EDMUND JONES

NEW YORK

GROSSET & DUNLAP

PUBLISHERS

c.c.1920



THE MYSTERY MIND

Copyright, 1920, by Harper & Brothers
Printed in the United States of America
Published November, 1920
L-U

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	PHANTOMS	1
II.	THE MASTER MIND	11
III.	KIDNAPED	17
IV.	THE HOUSE OF HORRORS	27
V.	PHANTOM FACE	42
VI.	DEVIL'S CHOICE	52
VII.	THE PORTRAIT	57
VIII.	EVER-STALKING DEATH	63
IX.	PSYCHIC SIGNATURES	68
X.	THE WAR OF WILLS	79
XI.	A NEW CLUE	86
XII.	THE WOLF	97
XIII.	DISAPPEARING DEAD	102
XIV.	A MIDNIGHT TRAIL	109
XV.	NEIGHBORS	118
XVI.	HYDRA-HEAD	129
XVII.	THE SECRET PASSAGEWAY	141
XVIII.	DAWN	153
XIX.	CLAIRVOYANCE	159
XX.	THE RUTHLESS HAND	169
XXI.	VIOLET'S BIRTHDAY	178
XXII.	THE SECOND SITTING	195
XXIII.	A GRIM JOKE	198
XXIV.	WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN	204
XXV.	UNDER COVER OF REVELRY	208

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
XXVI.	THE MYSTERY OF THE MAP	221
XXVII.	BARRICADED	233
XXVIII.	A GLASS OF WATER	238
XXIX.	THE NIGHT PROWLER	246
XXX.	MASTERY	256
XXXI.	"DOMES OF SILENCE"	263
XXXII.	TO APPEASE THE DEVIL GOD	271
XXXIII.	AN ESCAPE IN THE DARK	280
XXXIV.	CHESTER RANDOLPH	285
XXXV.	THE LAST BATTLE	291
XXXVI.	BEYOND DEATH	301
XXXVII.	DISSENSION	307
XXXVIII.	QUICKSANDS	323
XXXIX.	A FIRE IN THE NIGHT	332
XL.	THE MYSTERY MIND	347

THE MYSTERY MIND

THE MYSTERY MIND

I

PHANTOMS

IN her vexation Violet turned in bed, boring with a very blond head into the depths of her pillow. It was unreasonable; wholly unreasonable. Doctor Sutton, her guardian, had insisted that she postpone her wedding until after her eighteenth birthday. That was a difference of only a very few weeks, but it disarranged all her pet plans, it meant that she would have to wait just that much longer, and she loved Robert better than anything else in the world.

A sharp slam of the shutter startled her, scattering rebellious thoughts widecast. There was no mistaking the metallic sound as the heavy, old-fashioned wooden frame engaged the catch holding it to the side of the house. Yet outside there was not the faintest breath of breeze. No stir of the foliage framing the open square of window reassured her. No movement of the sultry air accounted for the interruption to her very sulky reflections.

She turned again and lay still, fearful, gazing intently at the patch of moonlight patterned by the leaves. A reflected illumination revealed her slim, girlish outline beneath the covering. Her hair, damp as a result of restless tossing about, clung to her forehead in a natural curl. Her eyes were bright, glistening in the semidarkness as she waited. There was a delicate ethereal element in the molding of her features which betrayed a fine-strung sensitiveness, suggested the depth and strength of her imagination.

But the sudden slam had been no creation of fancy. The sharp click of the catch had been too familiar a sound to be mistaken. Alarming her was the fact that she had heard no creaking of the rusty hinges. There had been no natural wide swing of the shutter, accountable, perhaps, without a wind. Rather, it was as though some intruder, some living thing, had lurched against it momentarily in the stillness of the night.

No further sound or movement gave color to her fright. After a while she smiled faintly, remembering the many baseless fears of her childhood, recalling to mind the several occasions on which her terrified screams had alarmed the household, and all to no purpose. From infancy Violet Bronson had been fanciful, eerie, claiming at times to see strange, floating, filmy forms, to hear vague and elusive strains of music. Could this, after all, be some trick of her subconscious mind?

Could her sleeplessness have induced the return of childish illusion?

Resolutely she faced the wall. There the moonlight traced the designs of the wall paper. In its sheen the tints of the conventional figures were transformed strangely. But there was something restful in the effect, perhaps a hypnotic something in the lunar rays. She felt a drowsiness stealing over her. Her eyes became heavy-lidded. She realized that sleep, at last, was coming. Suddenly, upon the wall before her eyes, there rose the shadow of a man. His face was in profile, and it was the outline of a face such as she had never seen upon any living creature. It was as though his features blended, blurred, faded into nothing. The top and back of the head was distinct, as shadowed by the moon. The nose, the mouth, the jaw of the intruder were semitransparent. It was a phantom face, a countenance possessing neither substance nor reality.

Terrified, she sought to scream and found the muscles of her throat paralyzed. As quickly as the shadow had risen before her it dropped from view. It seemed to her that some one had clambered through the window, swiftly, silently. Once more she tried to find her voice, then, with mounting courage, she controlled herself. Listening, hearing no sound, she rose in bed. She glanced about the room with distended eyes, seeking to penetrate the darkness. Feverishly

her hand groped for the switch of the reading lamp standing by her bed.

At that moment she heard a second sound. As in the case of the shutter, there was no mistaking it. It came from the farther corner of the room, near the door to the hall. It was the noise made by the quick closing of a book. Almost at the same instant her fingers caught the switch, fumbled for a moment, pressed the button which made the connection. The room was flooded with a shaded light more effective than a brighter illumination, since it did not dazzle her eyes. To her quick visual survey nothing was revealed. There was no one in the room, no place where any person could have hidden so quickly. Again she started to scream; again she checked herself.

She threw the covers back, slid to the floor in her bare feet, rushed to the hall door, glanced out not without trepidation. A night light on the floor below illuminated the stairs. So far as she could see there was no one in the hall. No sound caught her ears; nor did she now sense the presence of an intruder.

She closed the door and locked it, laughing nervously at her fright. She stole to the window, looking out cautiously upon the spacious grounds of the Sutton estate. She studied the moonlit lawn, the trees and foliage here and there—nowhere affording shelter for the skulking figure of a man. Finally she returned to bed, switching

off the light, consoling herself with the thought that Lawncrest, the suburb where they lived, was notably free from tramps and prowlers. She smiled ruefully as she remembered once more the many times, as a child, she had been sure of the cause of her fear, only to learn it was some prank of her consciousness.

Rearranging her pillows, half a dozen little squares as light and dainty as Violet herself, shaking out the mussed folds of her nightgown and of the covers, pushing back the hair from her face, she settled to her rest, determined to sleep. But though her eyes closed dutifully, and though she slipped away into a measure of unconsciousness, no genuine repose was hers.

It seemed to her first that she stood in the depths of a tropical jungle, alone, friendless, unprotected. Overhead the trees towered to the height of seventy and a hundred feet. At her feet was a slimy pool, trembling with life. Not far off two eyes, green, feline, menaced her from the depths of the underbrush. She started back, afraid; then she laughed, knowing there was no danger.

"I'm only dreaming!" she exclaimed, aloud.

"That may be," explained a voice, a voice ever so vaguely familiar, a voice coming from nowhere and yet audible, "that may be, but you are in danger."

"I am not really here," she asserted.

"This is the place where you were born. Your feet rest upon the very spot where stood the tent

in which your mother lay. Your first gasping baby outcry echoed feebly beneath these same century-old trees. Because you were born here you are in danger."

"How can that be?" she exclaimed, irritably.

It seemed to her that she stamped her foot, fretfully, as she used to do when a child. Almost as though that action broke the spell the scene changed. She did not see the transformation, nor realize it was taking place, until suddenly she found herself standing on a rocky ledge, shivering, cold, clad still in the filmy folds of her nightdress.

Before her opened a vast cavern. The formation of the rock was grotesque, much like the yawning mouth of some primeval monster. Then she caught an even more striking resemblance in the general contour of the opening, for the jutting shoulder of rock above the cave was a perfect, though gigantic, skull. Behind her, and to both sides, were sheer walls of granite rising up to the dim blue of a sky far above. Sweeping down into the ravine was the cold, dry wind, which chilled her, which wrapped her in a dread embrace, the embrace of death.

For a moment she shuddered; attempted in vain to cry out. Then she remembered. She was dreaming.

Suddenly the cold light of a blue flame sprang up at the back of the cavern, directly ahead of her. She saw that it burned in a crude altar, a

cavity carved from solid rock, surrounded by rough representations of the Zodiac, by ancient Sabian symbols. With the inconsistency of dreams she found herself close. A priest, shrouded in black, made obeisance before the shrine. The faces of the other worshipers were concealed by their postures of reverence; there was no motion anywhere in the cave except on the part of the man in attendance upon the altar.

"This is the Devil worship of Atlantis," explained the mysterious voice. "This is the last surviving colony from the City of the Golden Gates, here at the headlands of the Orinoco River. In these mountains is concealed the golden treasure of the High Priests of Atlantis, preserved faithfully by the worshipers of Satan for three hundred thousand years. Because of this treasure you are in danger."

"I am only dreaming," she asserted, desperately.

The voice made no reply. Suddenly there rose up, in the smoke of the burning offering, a wraith of indistinguishable mien and feature. To her horror it spoke, and she could hear. It was the same voice. It was the mysterious voice of interpretation, except that now it spoke in a language she could not understand.

In response to a command of the specter one of the worshipers stepped to the altar. A gesture, and before the eyes of the dreamer the man, a black, was transformed slowly into the figure of a fox.

The animal, waking to action, turned, and then with a snarl rushed straight for the dreaming girl.

She tried to scream, to run, to raise an arm in self-protection. She was helpless. But, as before, she remembered, all at once, that the whole experience was a nightmare; that she could not be harmed. She smiled, and as she did so, the fox faded into nothing, disappeared before her.

The ghostly presence hovering in the smoke of the altar spoke again; calling up another worshiper, another black. This man, transformed into a wolf, sprang for Violet, and at her confident smile vanished in similar manner. The wraith gestured again, and at the gesture a woman was changed to a snake. As this unclean thing wriggled toward her, its beady eyes raised and fixed upon hers, the dreamer shuddered. Not until the serpent coiled, raised itself before her, could she summon the smile which caused it to vanish.

The ordeal was not completed. The fourth victim of the caprice of the apparition of smoke in the altar was not transformed to an animal, but at the gesture suddenly covered his face with a cry of agony, then turned to her, slowly taking his hands from before his features.

She cried out, stepping backward in horror. The face of the black had disappeared. A strange iridescent shimmering nothing occupied the area where his countenance should have been. It was —she knew this, subconsciously—the phantom

face she had seen shadowed upon the wall of the bedroom.

With upraised hands, with gasping breath and heart beating wildly in fear, she backed away. Steadily, relentlessly, the phantom-faced man advanced toward her. In sheer terror and desperation she nerved herself, forced the ghost of a smile to white, dry, trembling lips. Immediately he disappeared, leaving her shaken, unstrung, for all that she knew it to be a nightmare.

But there was no relief. With a sudden cry of rage the priest himself turned toward her. He stepped down from the altar, and with his draperies held over his face hurried to confront her. Not until he was within the reach of her arm did he sweep aside the folds of heavy cloth from his features.

One glance, and every instinct of self-control fled from her. She screamed again and again. She put up tiny fists, beating upon his shoulders, striving to drive him back, seeking in vain to close her eyes and so shut out the sight of him.

The custodian of the rites of Satan was a monster, a cyclops. Where the eyes should have been there were only empty, distorted sockets. In the very center of a head horribly deformed there glared a single eye, without protecting lid or lash. To the girl it seemed a glowing orb of fire, burning into her sight with a malignant hatred which robbed her of every faculty. Her feet, on which

she stood, went numb. Her hands, helpless, were cold. Bending her back, gloating in the very incarnation of evil, the priest leaned closer, closer.

Gasping, straining for breath, grasping at his robes, shrieking with lungs which burned in her terror, she awoke to find herself clutching the bedclothes so firmly that the points of her nails had penetrated the cloth, bruising the skin of her palms. Her first thought was to wonder whether she had screamed. Bursting from the bed, she rushed to the door to listen.

All was quiet. There was no disturbance. Weak, blood throbbing still from the experience, she remembered, all at once, the second sound she had heard before the nightmare, the sound of a closing book. She went to the table, switching on a small light there. Before her was the novel she had purchased that day. Inserted in it was a slip of paper, its end protruding. With a sense of premonition she picked it up, reading:

If you attempt to marry Robert Dupont you will bring upon yourself the vengeance of Evil Eye.

For an instant she stood, gazing at the message in her hand. Then she tottered. Finally she slipped to the floor, limply, in a faint. Had the events of the evening been calculated deliberately to prey upon her supersensitiveness, they could have succeeded no more admirably.

II

THE MASTER MIND

ROBERT DUPONT had been interested in hypnotism since the very beginning of his college days. He had taken his degree in medicine and to some extent had practiced his profession in conventional manner, but it was as an expert in the new science of mind that he had attracted attention in medical and scientific circles.

To Doctor Sutton, the guardian of his fiancée, he owed most of his opportunity. The old scientist, himself aware of the potency of these new forces coming into public attention, had recognized early the special fitness of Dupont for work in that field; had encouraged the young man upon every occasion; in fact, had given Dupont lessons in many phases of occultism which had come to his notice, which he had mastered, phases not generally recognized as legitimate fields for research by contemporary savants. It was Doctor Sutton's crowning wish that Dupont should marry his ward, Violet; and the gradual and sure growth of a love between them had been his greatest source of happiness.

Young Dupont was essentially the mental

machine. In boyish school-days his ambitions had been athletic and adventurous. A certain physical prowess remained with him, and in those sports in which he found recreation he excelled easily. It was his head which marked him, however; a strong, massively built, square-set temple to his splendid mind. He stood more than six feet in his stockings. Broad powerful shoulders indicated the athlete. But his eyes, deep-set, penetrating, gifted with the ability to search deep, betrayed his greatest strength.

Now Dr. Robert Dupont, before a scoffing circle of prominent medical and scientific men, faced the crucial test of his career, stood ready to make or lose a country-wide reputation. His articles in leading professional journals had awakened a storm of protest. Inevitably he had been called upon to demonstrate, to prove his assertions. With no question of failure in his thoughts he had accepted the challenges, and so, ringed about by those who doubted him, he prepared to prove the power of mind.

"You have seen me put this subject into a hypnotic trance," he exclaimed, his voice carrying to every corner of the crowded auditorium. "Now, simply in response to my wish you will note that the blood will recede from this arm, on which my colleague Doctor Langham will operate. The nerves will be dead, the veins and arteries and blood vessels drained. The subject will

suffer no pain, no nerve shock; will carry no recollection of an exceedingly painful bit of surgical work. The staff of this hospital—" He paused, smiling. In the uniform white garments of the operating pit he stood out by sheer force of personality; he literally towered over the nurses and surgeons grouped about him. "The staff of this hospital will make all the tests necessary to prove the truth of my assertions, to prove to you that under hypnotism a subject suffers less nerve shock, less strain by fifty per cent, than under any anæsthetic known to science, local or general."

There was a confused buzz over the room; then a hushed silence as the surgeons began to operate. Dupont stepped back and as he did so a man, apparently one of the internes, approached hurriedly. Studying him, Dupont somehow sensed something wrong in spite of the hospital white. To the hypnotist there was something suggestive of the fox in the man's face, an elusive flitting of cunning, of greed, of avarice, over his features.

"Doctor Dupont?"

"Yes." Frowning. "I'm busy now, as you can see."

The other produced a yellow envelope. "This telegram for you is very important. We were asked to bring it to you, no matter what you were doing. Another wire, to the hospital, asked us to do this."

Impatiently, Dupont started to open the envelope. Then—it was a subtle trick of his

alertness—he detected from the corner of his glance an expression of satisfaction upon the face of the man who brought it. He remembered that he was in the midst of an experiment which would begin or close his career. It was entirely possible that some ill-wisher might stoop to a deliberate trick to upset him, to unsettle his mind, to defeat him. After all, there was nothing which could not wait an hour, perhaps an hour and a half or three quarters. He stuffed the envelope into his pocket.

"But it is very im—" began the other.

Silently Dupont looked at him. Under the glance which no living man could support, the interne gulped, turned white, and fled.

Perhaps ten minutes later Dupont felt keenly the pressure of another mind bent upon his. He sensed the malicious, malevolent thoughts from some distant source, directed against the success of his venture. Smiling, for in the realm of mind he knew no peer, he concentrated upon the nullification of the influence, succeeding with ease. Then he turned to the experiment.

Recollection of the telegram came as he left the building, two hours later. Ringing in his ears yet was the applause at the complete vindication of all his assertions and claims. Wholly at peace with the world he opened the envelope; smoothed the yellow slip upon his knee.

Hurry to me at once. I am in the greatest danger.

VIOLET.

As he read, the perspiration broke out upon his forehead. After all, it had been something to be put above his success, his career, everything.

He raced to the railroad station, phoning to his man, Dacca, at the hotel, to pack and follow. The demonstration had been in Philadelphia; Violet was in New York. With preliminary preparations and conferences he had been away from her for nearly a week. He could have no conception of what might have happened, of what the trouble might be.

In New York he taxied madly from the Pennsylvania to the Grand Central station, barely catching a local for Lawncrest. At the suburb he found a Ford and was driven at top speed to the Sutton home.

The old stone pile showed no signs of excitement. Since leaving Philadelphia in the afternoon supper time had passed and now it was night. There were lights in the lower floor, the hospitable illumination which always distinguished Doctor Sutton's premises. While he waited on the porch he heard the familiar sounds of the country about him, the rustling of the trees in a rising breeze, the chirping of crickets from the direction of the Sound, the distant whistle of a steam locomotive. It was hard to believe that anything could have happened to Violet. Then old Katy opened the door and there was in her face no worry, no sign of distress, nothing but a broad and very genuine welcome.

"Sure, and they're all in the library, Mr. Robert," she said.

Puzzled, he made his way through the darkened reception room. At the portières he paused, hearing Violet's voice.

"Doctor Daddy," she complained, suddenly, calling her guardian by the pet name which had been his since her babyhood, "I'm afraid to go to bed."

"Why, why, what's the matter?" came in gentle tone of surprise.

"I—I was ashamed to tell you," she confessed. "I had a terrible nightmare last night, and I'm afraid there is some terrible danger—"

Smiling, Dupont pushed through the curtains. "It's all right, Violet dear!" he exclaimed. "I received your telegram, and—well, here I am!"

Her eyes went wide. Something disturbed her, overshadowing the joy of seeing him.

"Telegram, Robert?"

He took it from his pocket, handing it to her. She opened it. She read it; then allowed it to drop to the floor. All at once she rushed to him, and as she clung close, as his arms slipped about her, holding her, he became aware that she was trembling.

"Robert!" There was terror in her voice.

"Yes?" He smiled, reassuringly.

"I—I didn't send you any telegram!"

III

KIDNAPED

FOR several moments Dupont failed to grasp the full significance of her revelation.

"You—you didn't send it!" he repeated. Then his face darkened. "It was a scheme after all, Violet." He told her the circumstances under which the telegram had been handed to him. "Some one wanted to upset me; to prevent the success of my demonstration. I have some hidden enemy."

Her brows puckered prettily. He thought her unusually beautiful as she led him to the divan in the window, made a place for him at her side. While puzzling reflections occupied her he noticed the blending of the delicate lace of her summery dress into the full-tinted skin of neck and throat; his eyes rested fondly upon the curve of lips red with the red of youth, he thrilled in recollection of the first time she had given them to him only a short two months before. What a very worth-while treasure she was! His to serve, to cherish, to protect!

"Robert!" She turned suddenly. She was still very serious. "It is more than a plot, a scheme to prevent your success. It is something

to do with both of us. The telegram was sent by some one who knew about me because—because I am in danger; terrible danger, I'm afraid."

"You? You in danger?" He laughed. He could afford to laugh now that he had her in his arms.

Reproachfully, she reached in her dress, producing a bit of paper and giving it to him. It was the threatening note she had found in the book the night before, after her terrifying experience in her dream.

He sobered as he read. Genuinely anxious, he questioned her and listened to the recital of the events of the nightmare.

"Do you really think, Robert," she concluded, "do you think there could be any connection between the dream and that warning note?"

"There might be. I have no faith in the ordinary interpretation of dreams. That sort of occultism is almost wholly charlatanism, worthy of gypsies and fortune-telling quacks. But psychic research societies have recorded many cases of premonitions or warnings in dreams. Your nightmare probably was additional warning. It—it looks as though danger of some sort actually threatens and so I'm going to keep watch over you, very close watch."

She snuggled a hand into his, gratefully. Then she pouted. "And I thought, Robert, that I didn't have an enemy in the world."

"You shouldn't have. I've never known you to do an unkind or an unfeeling thing."

While he reassured her, almost unconscious of his words, his mind revolved, over and over, the factors in the problem before them, the events at Philadelphia as well as her nightmare and the mysterious placing of the warning note in her room. He knew that Violet seldom dreamed. Some particular thing must have induced the strange and colorful events intruding into her slumbers the night before. With modern methods of psychoanalysis at his command he knew that that fact, could he uncover it, might be far more valuable to him than the slip of paper or the telegram as a clue to any trouble menacing them.

"Have you any idea, Violet, just what might have caused you to dream?"

"Why, yes!" She colored, glancing up at him sidewise. "I was very restless and was tossing all about because—because Doctor Daddy told me I must put off marrying you until after my eighteenth birthday."

Dupont whistled. "Why—why, he didn't—he hasn't said anything to me!" he exclaimed.

"It was very sudden," she explained. "Yesterday afternoon I came in to show him my wedding dress and he seemed worried and preoccupied. Then, as I was going to leave him, he took me by the arms and told me I ought to postpone the wedding—that I would please him very much if I would wait until after my birthday."

"But why?"

She flushed, in indignation now. "It was very unreasonable. He thought I ought to know what was in my father's will—"

"As if that made any difference to me!" interrupted Dupont.

"That was exactly what I said." She nestled close again.

He rose. "Come on. Let's see what he has to say."

Sutton had stepped into his study upon the arrival of Dupont, anxious to leave the young people to themselves after their week's separation. The little room bore all the indications of a very complete biological laboratory. As they entered, the old scientist was bent over some intricate experiment, his white hair blending into the white of the enameled steel of his bench. Hearing them, he straightened and turned, smiling. His eyes were soft, revealing the affection he gave both ward and protégé. Only in the firm lines about his mouth, the steel-knit muscles of bared forearm, the long, slender, deft fingers, did he betray the savant.

Dupont was blunt. "Why do you want us to postpone our wedding?"

"Well," the doctor glanced away, "it's a difference of only a few weeks, Robert—"

"But that's no reason!"

"No one knows the contents of her father's will.

He left two wills, one not to be opened until she was eighteen, or until she died."

"That doesn't make a bit of difference to me." Dupont slipped an arm about the slender waist of the girl. "Surely you had some other reason, something you don't want to tell us, perhaps, but—but something you ought to explain, nevertheless."

"Yes, Doctor Daddy!" Violet adopted a coaxing tone. "Tell us."

Doctor Sutton sank into a chair rather heavily. Lines of worry appeared about his eyes, confirming the suspicion of the younger man.

"Look!" Dupont handed him the warning note left in Violet's room. "She was afraid to show you this," he explained. Then he produced the telegram. "Look at this; sent to me in Philadelphia in an effort to prevent my success in the demonstration."

Doctor Sutton glanced at both slips. Then he turned to his desk, and from an inner drawer, behind two locks, produced a third.

"This was on my desk yesterday morning," he told them.

Dupont read with a sinking heart, Violet leaning around his shoulder to see also.

DOCTOR SUTTON,—If you permit the marriage of your ward before her birthday you will be held responsible; and we will not answer for her safety.

EVIL EYE.

"My children!" The old scientist rose and put a hand upon the shoulder of each. "I don't know what this means, I have no idea who may be sending these notes, or why. But perhaps it would be safer—"

"Never!" Dupont felt a hot surge of indignation. "I never backed down before idle threats in anything in my life, and I'm not going to start now."

He glanced at Violet. Her grasp of his arm became a little firmer.

"Doctor Daddy," she asked, eagerly, "when I was born—where I was born, up on the Orinoco River—was there a priest, a horrible-looking black man, with only one eye? Could that be Evil Eye?"

Sutton's face went very white. "Where the expedition stopped there was a tribe of head hunters, devil worshipers, and there was a tradition that they were led by Evil Eye, an old man who was described to me as a monster but whom no white man ever saw. When your father died the natives spread the report broadcast that he had been cursed by Evil Eye, and that he died as the result of the curse."

"You never told me any of this before," protested the girl.

"It—it was all talk. I never saw Evil Eye; I do not believe he existed. I am not even sure the blacks were devil worshipers. I never was

able to find the Temple of the Skull, of which they spoke only with the greatest awe. I always believed the natives to be great romancers."

"You told me father and mother died of the fever. Did—"

"I intended to tell you the truth on your eighteenth birthday. Your father was poisoned by his partner, Stuart Steele. No one knows this except the three of us, now. Steele never suspected that I knew."

"And mother—"

"Your mother was an unhappy and an unfortunate woman, Violet. Steele and your father, partners in a huge Venezuelan rubber monopoly, believed they discovered the hiding place of a fabulous treasure of gold, guarded by the natives and dedicated to their satanic deity. Steele was an unscrupulous man of tremendous personal power. He was an adept in hypnotism and black arts, which he had studied from the natives of various tropical countries. He gradually brought your mother under his control. Though she herself was stricken with fever, and dying, he forced her, under hypnotic suggestion, to give the poison to your father. He wanted the treasure all to himself."

Violet's head drooped on Dupont's shoulder. It was a terrible revelation to her. A sudden idea flashed into Dupont's mind.

"Do you suppose Steele could be—"

"No!" Sutton shook his head. "Steele was slain by the blacks when they discovered that he and Violet's father had been seeking their hidden temple. It was only through the gratitude of some of the natives whom I had doctored that I escaped alive with baby Violet. Her father, with his last dying breath, intrusted her to my care, together with his papers and a few personal belongings. He whispered something about the secret of the treasure, but I know nothing of that, nor will any of us know until Violet is eighteen and a bulky document in the bank downtown is opened and read."

"Then"—Dupont still sought for an explanation of the various warnings—"if Steele is dead and there are no other white men who know of these things, either we have to believe that Violet and I have enemies of whom we do not know, and who have stumbled upon the legend of Evil Eye and are trying to frighten us, or"—he drew the girl a little closer—"else we must believe that the blacks have come all the way down the Orinoco, have followed you to this country, and are threatening us in rather civilized white-man fashion; presumably after the secret of the treasure, if it does exist, or after something perhaps which comes to Violet on her eighteenth birthday."

Sutton smiled soberly. "Violet's mother and father, Steele, and myself were the sole survivors

of the expedition. No one but I, in this country, could possibly have heard of Evil Eye. I have never mentioned the name. If there is a priesthood of devil worshipers, and if there is a treasure, there may be emissaries sent to New York to—"

Dupont laughed. "I shall never believe it unless I'm forced to."

Suddenly Violet straightened. "My dream, Robert!" she exclaimed. "I dreamed about Evil Eye and a temple shaped like a skull and a specter in the smoke which sent different horrible things after me. It's a warning, Robert! The devil worshipers are after me, Robert!" She began to tremble.

"Nonsense!" He broke away. "I'll believe it is something serious when something begins to happen. It may all be a joke. Meanwhile there may be danger, and so I'll come out to Lawncrest and stay, to be near you. Furthermore"—he smiled, glancing at Doctor Sutton—"we'll be married right away to show them how little afraid we are. Right, Violet?"

Happy, she went to the porch with him. Doctor Sutton ordered the car to take Dupont in for a change of clothes and a few belongings. His last view of her was as she stood, waving, silhouetted in the light from behind.

Less than an hour and a half afterward, still early in the evening, he returned. He found the

front door wide open; within signs of the utmost confusion. In the reception room Katy, faithful old Katy, lay unconscious with a deep gash in her forehead. In her hand was a stove handle; beside her lay prone the figure of a young man seriously injured from her lusty use of the weapon. In the library he stumbled upon the butler, a bullet hole through his head. Groping, stumbling from behind the enameled steel table of his study, Doctor Sutton greeted him, dazed, with eyes bleary from a vicious blow on the head.

"Violet has been kidnaped!" he gasped. Then he fell back again.

IV

THE HOUSE OF HORRORS

ONCE again Violet stood within the cavern of the black Temple of the Skull, motionless in terror. Once more the serpent was writhing toward her, its beady eyes fixed upon hers, holding her with the venom of its glance. As before, she realized she was dreaming and she tried to smile. But to her sudden amazed horror the muscles of her face refused to respond to her bidding. The snake continued toward her.

With frantic, fruitless efforts of will she backed away, seeking in vain to control her expression. Was it reality, and not a dream at all? She found farther retreat blocked by the solid wall of cold granite behind her. Escape was impossible. The serpent coiled, rose, raised a loathsome head before her and remained poised, prepared to strike. With a final effort she screamed. As she did so she awoke and found a woman bending over her.

Her surroundings were utterly unfamiliar. With frightened glance she looked about and found herself in a light, airy bedroom, palatially

large and furnished with an abandon of luxury. The bed on which she lay possessed a softness unknown even in the comfort of the Sutton home. It was a four-poster of mahogany, hand-carved; and all the furniture of the chamber was of the same wood and period. With the curious faculty of the human mind to stamp upon itself some minute bit of detail in its moments of stress she noticed that the hangings at the windows were tapestried silk, that nearest her was an exquisite representation of some lady of the days of chivalry bestowing a token upon her kneeling knight.

But what had happened? Why should she find herself here, and just where was she? With sudden rushing return of recollection the events of her kidnaping came back to her. The front bell had rung. Katy, as usual, had gone to the door. The butler, in the dining room, had been busy with his silver. The other servants had been away; she herself had been sitting with Doctor Sutton, for company, in his study, watching him at his experiments. Then there had come the sounds of a scuffle. Katy had screamed. Her guardian and the butler both had rushed toward the front part of the house while she had followed, in dismay.

Out of the confusion the flash of a shot and the murder of the butler stood out clear. Two men, masked with hoods which slipped completely over their heads, seized her. The two other in-

truders, similarly disguised, backed Doctor Sutton into his laboratory. A moment later she heard a groan and a crash of steel and broken bottles and shattered test tubes. Struggling desperately, she was dragged toward the door. Then a rush of skirts brought Katy, Irish determination in her eyes. Katy had rushed to the kitchen for a weapon. With a wicked swing of the stove handle she knocked out one of the men clutching Violet; and she was only subdued when one of the masked intruders used the butt end of his weapon viciously.

The sound of an approaching motor frightened them away. Violet was dragged to a waiting car, still struggling. She lost consciousness as they lifted her in and started off.

Now where was she? The woman bending over the bed smiled as she saw that Violet had returned to consciousness. Violet, studying her for the first time, was amazed at her beauty. Her features were flawless. Her teeth, flashing in the smile, were perfect. But there was something disturbing about her coloring. Her skin, almost swarthy, was too free from blemish. Her eyes, a deep brown, framed by hair a lustrous ebony, were too dark and unrevealing of the thoughts behind them. Violet puzzled for a word to fit the description in her mind. The woman's beauty was too—too—smooth! Very suddenly Violet understood her impression, she remembered

the bit of nightmare which had returned to her upon her awakening. The woman was actually snakelike—glistening, covert, fascinating.

"Do you feel all right?" the watcher asked, kindly.

In her voice there was nothing but friendliness, but Violet's impressions were too strong for her. She rose, sitting upon the edge of the bed, drawing away from the other, shuddering and silent.

"My name is Vera Collins, and you—I know your name. You are Violet Bronson. Now"—smiling—"now we are acquainted."

Violet was inarticulate still. All at once she slid to the floor. She rushed to the door, trying it. It was locked, resisting her almost frenzied efforts. On feet decidedly weak beneath her she hurried to a window, striving to lift a sash. Useless! Outside a broad sweep of country was revealed to her, but no other house or structure, no road, nothing that gave her any hope of escape. Panting, she backed against the wall, facing the woman in the room with her.

"Why—why am I here?" she demanded. "Take me home! I must get home!"

Vera smiled, approaching her much as if she were a refractory child. "You must not excite yourself, Miss Bronson. Everything will be all right. You are in no danger and"—just the slightest hesitation — "no harm will come to you."

'But where am I? Why am I here? Why was I kidnaped?"

Vera laughed as she took her arm, leading her back toward the bed. Near the archaic four-poster was a magnificent old-fashioned mahogany chiffonier. Two of the drawers Vera opened, revealing a number of summer frocks and a pile of fluffy intimacies necessary in the feminine toilette.

"Here is everything you will need for a change, Miss Bronson," she suggested, rather coaxingly. "You will wish to make yourself presentable because you will have the freedom of the house and—" she checked herself abruptly; then added, "Just be patient. Everything will be all right."

Violet glanced at the clothes before her. All at once something caught her eye and in amazement she rummaged through the contents of both the drawers. The dresses were hers. She recognized her own lingerie. She found slippers and stockings and ribboned frills. In a closet were several of her hats. Not only had she been kidnaped in person, but here was fully half her wardrobe. Nothing she would need was missing. Her face blanched in renewed fear as she faced the other woman again.

Very suddenly Vera's expression underwent a transformation. She glanced about. Then she took Violet's arm with fingers of steel. Her eyes narrowed and her breath was hot with passion.

"Keep your mouth shut, and fix yourself up

pretty, and remember that you love no one but Robert Dupont, and"—a whisper—"I'll help you escape from here!"

Before Violet could appreciate fully the other's meaning Vera had rushed to the door and was gone. Violet followed. She found the door unlocked; she looked out upon a long, spacious hall. Then she glanced at herself and drew back.

Upon her dress was the mud and dust of her abduction, the creases and folds of a night spent in her clothes. One sleeve was ripped, gaping away from her shoulder. Something had caught both skirt and a stocking beneath, resulting in a wide tear. She realized she was wholly unpresentable.

Vera had told her to fix herself up prettily. Vera had promised to aid her to escape. She found that she could lock the door of the room from the inside. She discovered a commodious bath opening off the chamber, and at her disposal. Determining to miss no opportunity to elude whatever danger might be hanging over her, she proceeded hurriedly to get into clean and comfortable garments.

No one disturbed her until she had quite transformed herself; until she had nerved herself to an exploration of the house; to an attempt to solve the mystery of her kidnaping. A knock on the door was startling. Then, in response to her quavering answer, a servant entered with her breakfast on a tray.

She studied the man. He was a little hunchback with long, deep lines in his face, with eyes pinched in by the folds of his flesh and glittering in their tiny, piglike sockets. To her there seemed a certain vague sympathy in his manner. She decided to chance questioning him.

"Tell me where I am!" she pleaded. "What house is this, and why am I here?"

He put the tray down, arranging the dishes for her without a word. Finally he looked up, a grin spreading over his face and distorting it in weird, almost repellent, fashion. His voice, little more than a whisper, was a throaty wheeze.

"I can't tell you nothing, lady," he explained, with a prodigious wink. "But this"—sobering—"this is the House of Horrors."

Something in the way he said it terrified Violet. She watched him from the room, motionless, then for a long while she stood trembling, more frightened by the mystery of her situation than through any definite consciousness of danger.

Eventually she ate the food put before her, a meal well selected and tastefully cooked. Refreshed and rested, she felt a return of confidence, and began to feel intuitively that escape from this place was certain. First she made another attempt to open the windows of the room, but discovered that the sash, apparently wood, was in reality steel. The panes of glass were too small to allow the passage of a human body if

broken out. Unquestionably this house was a disguised fortress.

She hurried into the hall, descending broad stairs to a lower floor, where before her opened huge reception and living rooms. The front doors were massive, of heavy paneled oak. Approaching them she made a very curious discovery. There were no knobs or locks that she could see; no apparent way of opening or closing them. She investigated the windows in the hall but found again the protection of steel painted to represent wood.

In the front reception room there were several large panes of glass, however. Elated, feeling that she would have no hesitation breaking her way out, she rushed over, leaning against the frame of the window to investigate. As her weight went against the frame four heavy iron bars shot down from cleverly hidden sockets above and outside the glass, engaging holes below and barring egress as effectually as prison steel. Startled, she stepped back. The bars, however, did not slip up into place again. Then, as she stood, wondering, she was conscious of a slight noise, and turned to see the doors of the room slide into place. She rushed over. They were knobless and without sign of lock or bolt. All her strength was insufficient to move them, to make the slightest impression upon them. She was trapped, and for what purpose she could not understand.

Another slight sound caught her. She glanced

about, seeing nothing, until something impelled her to look above her head. There, grinning evilly, was the face of the hunchback, with dancing malice in his little eyes. He was leaning down, looking at her through a square hole in the ceiling. The moment he realized she saw him, however, he drew back. With a sharp, metallic click, a bit of false ceiling slid across the aperture, and she was alone again.

The House of Horrors! She staggered back, leaning against the table to quiet the trembling of her limbs. At that moment there was a sound at the doors, and they opened. Into the room, with a smile of assurance and a rather confident manner, came a man immaculately dressed in the latest style and fashion, swinging a slender cane and approaching her with some measure of deference. She noticed that as the doors opened to admit him the bars at the window disappeared. Was it all to frighten her?

"Miss—Miss Bronson?" he inquired, suavely.

She nodded slightly, ill at ease, awaiting his next move.

He deposited hat, gloves, and cane upon the table. "My name is Carl Canfield," he explained. Taking her by the arm he led her toward a sofa between two windows. "There are a number of little things I wish to ask you and"— ingratiatingly—"we really should be getting acquainted, you know."

She drew away as he leaned close. "What do you want?" she asked, coldly.

"About your wedding," he began. "What is your religious preference? Do you want a minister or a priest?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" she stammered, eyes widening as she half grasped what was to follow. "How are you concerned in my wedding?"

He laughed. "Because I am to be the groom, my little blondie, and—"

Without waiting for more she summoned all her strength and brought the palm of her hand across his face. Then, as he staggered back—skin flushing fiery red from the blow, she jumped to her feet and ran out into the hall, up the stairs, into her room, breathless. With every fear now of physical violence, of things she dared not admit to her thoughts, she leaned against the door, locking it, and praying for any fate, any calamity, rather than association with the suave man she had met downstairs.

Too, something familiar about him worried her. Suddenly she caught it. As he smiled, his upper lip drew back from his teeth in a very peculiar manner. It was the smile of an animal, of a dog. With the undisguised beast in his eyes as he leaned over toward her with the smile, he was brutally wolfish for all his outer appearance of gentleman. In spite of herself Violet was carried back to the nightmare which had been her first warning of

these events. Though she fought it off, strove to drive all recollections of the Cavern of the Skull from her mind, she recognized Carl Canfield. She knew the wolf which had sprung at her in her dream.

Perhaps a quarter hour passed while she leaned against the door. In the time there was no hint of pursuit, no sound or indication that Canfield proposed to follow up his advances. Finally, with caution, with renewed determination to escape, she opened the door slightly; then slid out into the hall. Nowhere was there any sign of life. On tiptoes she started down the stairs. Halfway down she stopped, with heart starting to beat wildly. Just outside the doors to the room where she had fled from him stood the man of her fears. As she watched, afraid to move, he was joined by Vera. She said something to him in low tones, then together they entered the room. The doors closed behind them, noiselessly and quickly.

Subconsciously Violet knew that she was the subject of their conversation. She ran down and up to the doors, leaning over to catch any echo of their conversation, to find any crevice where she could listen. To her chagrin the panels were far too thick, the construction wholly sound-proof. Then she remembered the trap in the ceiling. Would it be possible to find it? She hurried upstairs. She estimated distances in the hall carefully, and found a small reading room over

the spot she wished. Entering, closing the doors, she whipped back the rug to examine the floor. At first she detected nothing; then a fine crack caught her eye, the outline of the top of the trap.

But how would she open it? She tried every device which occurred to her. She looked for secret springs on the wall and baseboard. Finally, giving it up, she leaned against a carved angle of the table leg nearest the trap and it gave way at her touch. Instantly the trap flew open. She crawled over, with distinct trepidation, and found herself looking directly down upon Canfield and Vera.

"It's nothing in my young life!" he exploded, at the moment she started to listen. "Phantom Face has given his orders, and they go!"

Phantom Face! That terrible face of her dream! That shadow on her wall! Violet drew back fearfully. She still could listen.

Vera's voice was charged with suppressed tension. "You're lying to me, Carl!" she exclaimed. "You want to marry her; you want to get rid of me."

"Nonsense!" He laughed. "Can—can I help it if she's a nifty-looking kid? Did I know she was going to be all to the merry?"

"You—" Was it Violet's imagination, or was there a distinct snakelike hiss in Vera's voice? "You won't get away with it, Carl Canfield,"

she threatened. "Rather than give you up I'll kill you!"

All at once there was a change in the attitude of the man. "If you are going to take that attitude, Vera," he told her, "here is something for you to worry about. Maybe you don't know it, but I'm aware you were visiting with the little blonde, and also I don't put it above you to help her get out of here. Perhaps you can put it over on Phantom Face. Probably you won't. But get this! Little cutie upstairs marries me, or she dies. That's orders. And she makes her choice before five o'clock this afternoon."

With a gasp Violet started back. Her elbow struck the mechanism of the trap. With a sudden click it shut. Starting to rise she discovered that her dress was caught; that she was a prisoner, helpless in the middle of the floor.

Frantically she sought to reach the leg of the table, to open the trap again. It was too far a reach. Then she tried to tear the goods of her gown, but it was material of too strong a texture. Even when she gathered her feet beneath her and braced the muscles of her legs she was unable to free herself.

The tears came, but she knew it would do no good to cry. Through the film of water in her eyes she noticed, all at once, a box of matches on a smoking stand just beside the table. That was within reach. Taking the matches she struck a

light and set fire to the dress where it was wedged in the floor. In fear every moment that the smoldering cloth would blaze up, would get beyond her control, she guided the little frill of flame along the material so as to burn her free. In a few moments she was liberated. For only an instant did she stop to glance at the ruined frock. Then she rushed out into the hall.

Another moment would have been too late. She heard voices and darted into another doorway. Canfield and Vera, hurrying up, rushed into the room she had left. Evidently they had heard the slam of the trap, or something had awakened their suspicions. The instant they were out of sight she ran out into the hall again, and fled to the other end where steps led up. It was all a gamble. Downstairs she knew of no way of escape. Now she might stumble right into the arms of servants or accomplices. But luck was with her. A window on the floor above actually stood open. Outside was a tiny square of roof. Without hesitation she clambered through.

The house was an old-fashioned mansion with many gables and porches and jutting corners. A drop of a few feet led to another roof which sloped toward the ground. Down that she made her way. At its edge she discovered a drain pipe with huge ornamental supports. That would act as a ladder to the ground. She had escaped at last.

Just as she let herself over the edge of the gutter she heard a cry. Above her, in the window, were Vera and Canfield. They disappeared. Realizing they would be after her she hurried, sprawling against the wall like an awkward climbing urchin, reckless of the skirts which hampered her. Half, three quarters of the distance down she made her way successfully. Then, just as she began to breathe freely, the pipe collapsed beneath her weight, plunging her to the ground.

She tried to catch herself, but her foot, entangled with the length of tin, was wrenched severely. Getting to her feet, she attempted to hobble away. Before she could reach the corner of the house she was overtaken. She felt the fingers of Canfield sink into her flesh cruelly. She heard Vera's low laugh. Then the pain of the ankle was too much. She fainted dead away into the arms of the man.

V

PHANTOM FACE

"SURE, and here's some breakfast for the both of yez, lunch that it is."

With a start Dupont straightened up, realizing that he had dozed at the side of the bed after his night and morning of vigil. He looked across to where Doctor Sutton sat, and smiled. Then he became very grim.

Katy, in the door, if anything was her usual cheerful self. Her head was bandaged heavily, but the girl was about her work and in particular was concerned over Sutton and Dupont. Very early in the morning the Medical Examiner had made his investigation. The police had come and, save for a lone sergeant downstairs, had departed. The body of the unfortunate butler had been taken away. That was a matter not mentioned, even among the servants. The whole event had been too horrible.

Under the eyes of Doctor Sutton were large blue rings. The old scientist had given prompt attention to injuries, even directing Dupont in the dressing of the wound upon his own head.

Nothing short of his remarkable skill had preserved the life of their prisoner, breathing naturally in the bed between them now, but nearly done for by the lusty swing of the Irish maid. The man was technically under arrest, but at the wish of Dupont had been left in the care of Sutton. Until he should regain consciousness the hypnotist had no possible clue to the abductors of Violet, nor of their destination. In hours of work the police had accomplished a little less than nothing.

Suddenly the man in bed stirred, opening his eyes.

"Hello!" he ventured, weakly, but rationally.

Instantly Dupont bent over, catching and fastening his glance. With irresistible intensity the young doctor murmured commands to the mind of his subject. In a very few moments of actual time the bandit was helpless in his control.

"Why did you kidnap the girl?" demanded Dupont.

"I don't know," was the answer.

"Where were you going to take her?"

"To the House of Horrors!"

Sutton gave a startled look at Dupont, but Dupont was intent only on gaining his hypnotic clue.

"Where is the House of Horrors? Describe to us exactly how to get there."

As the man muttered the directions Dupont jotted them down with a pencil, on the back of an

envelope. Then he snapped his fingers, breaking the control. He pocketed an automatic, which he had already obtained, and seized his hat. Leaving Doctor Sutton in charge, ignoring the older man's suggestion that he should wait until he could summon the help of the police, he raced downstairs and to the garage. There was his roadster, which his man had driven out. As Dacca was nowhere about, nor Sutton's chauffeur, he jumped in and started off alone. No consideration on earth should keep him from Violet a moment longer than necessary.

He knew the place called the House of Horrors by the injured man. It was the home of an eccentric millionaire, recently deceased, and unoccupied so far as anyone knew. Driving the little car into the shelter of a grove of small trees, after a breakneck trip on narrow, winding, cross-country roads, he stole up to the house in the shelter of a windbreak, stopping for observation by the side of a little vine-covered summerhouse.

At first there were no signs of life visible. Then he detected a moving something near the rear, recognizing finally a human figure, a girl's slender form, and grasping that she was clambering down a drain pipe. Could it be Violet? As he looked a support snapped beneath her weight, throwing her to the ground. He waited for nothing more, but circled around, back of the summerhouse, drawing his weapon as he sprinted to her aid.

It was Violet. Before he could reach her she was seized by two people from the house, a man and a woman. He saw her go limp in their arms, and he called out, but they did not hear. Though he ran with a speed he had never approached in college track work he was much too far away. They carried her in through a small back door and closed it. There was no response to his frantic pounding on the panel.

He rushed around to the front, ran up the steps to the double doors there. Before he could knock these swung open of their own accord.

Too obsessed with the picture of Violet helpless in the hands of her abductors to consider measures of ordinary caution, he hurried in and halfway down the hall before he realized there was no one in sight. Stopping, somewhat confused and uncertain what to do next, he thought he detected soft, swift steps behind him. He started to turn. He half caught a glimpse of his assailant, but had no time to raise a weapon or make an outcry. Some blunt thing descended upon his head. He knew nothing further.

He returned to consciousness in an automobile, uncomfortable with the jolting of the car. The curtains were up so that it was difficult to recognize any of the country. He knew that the machine was traveling at high speed because he was thrown constantly against his companion in the rear seat. Starting to move his arm so as to

hold himself he found that he was trussed, hand and foot, and helpless.

With an effort he managed to obtain a glance of the man beside him. At first a vague familiarity disturbed him; then he recognized the supposed interne who had brought the telegram to him in the midst of his demonstration in Philadelphia. As he confirmed this identity in his mind cold chills went up and down his spine, because it meant a well-organized, definite plot against Violet and himself, meant something more serious than either he or Doctor Sutton could understand. Moving his jaw, he found he was not gagged.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded.

"Oh!" His companion started uncomfortably. "You'll know in time," he replied, shortly.

Planning carefully, Dupont sought to twist himself about so as to bring his gaze to bear upon the man. If he could once—

The other grasped the purpose instantly. "Damn you," he sputtered, in prompt uneasiness, "you keep your eyes off me. I know what you can do with them and you're not going to get me or my name isn't Dick Renard."

"Your name is Dick Renard, is it?" mused Dupont.

"Aw—shut up, and—and see that you make those eyes behave."

To Dupont's delight he recognized their desti-

nation. Cautiously he kept the recognition to himself. It was an abandoned dye works, one of a number of mushroom institutions springing up under war conditions. It was four to five miles off the state road, fully twenty from the House of Horrors. But he knew the spot, knew the entire neighborhood.

He was handled roughly between the chauffeur and Renard. He heard the chauffeur addressed as Boggs and made a mental note of the name. If there were others of the gang here they were not in evidence, however, and he was simply hurried into a small, dingy room, bare of furnishings and without even a window to refresh the air and take away the smell of the rotting structure. While Boggs cut away the bonds at his ankles Renard lighted a half-burned candle on a table covered with tallow drippings. Hastily then they shoved him into a rickety chair, hurrying out and bolting the door.

Dupont grinned. This was a poor prison at best. There were any number of ways by which he could free his hands if they left him unguarded. No partition as frail as the wooden walls of this room could hold him. Losing no time he saw that he could burn the strap at his wrists by backing against the table and holding it in the flame of the candle. He caught the sudden dimming of the feeble light, the distinctive acrid smell, as the fire bit into the leather. Again he smiled.

At that moment some subtle, malignant, and powerful force impelled him to raise his glance to a small square aperture in the wall close by him. He had noticed it in his first quick survey of the room some moments before, had dismissed it lightly as a possible mode of ventilation. Now there met his eyes a face so horribly fantastic that for an instant he was baffled, conquered. For the first time in his life Robert Dupont knew momentary fear at the look of another. With a shudder he turned away.

It was and yet was not a human face. Some utterly inexplicable quality about the features made them semitransparent. It was as though the front of the head was modeled in the semblance of a man, with eyes and nose and mouth, but modeled of some strange, shimmering, iridescent, jellylike substance, now displaying phantom likenesses, flitting expressions of evil maliciousness, brief mocking flashes of sheer idiocy, now lapsing into a blurred, quivering, unformed whole which hurt and burned the glance, as from the strain of looking through unfocused glasses. Were it a face alone there would not have been the slightest illusion of reality. But cabbage ears of a dusky swarthiness, a heavy corded neck with a deep livid scar, a shock of untrimmed brutish black hair proved the living presence of the creature.

While the image of the Phantom Face seared

itself forever in the inner memory of Dupont, it was only for a brief instant that he lost control of himself. He shuddered and with the shudder his fright passed. Summoning the power often demonstrated by him he raised his eyes to the opening in the wall. Now the space was vacated. Without hesitation he rushed over. By standing on tiptoes he was able to look through. He found himself viewing rough, crude living quarters. There was a bed, a few poor articles of furniture, a number of pieces of cheap clothing. Of the man, if it were a man, there was no sign in Dupont's angle of vision.

Above a washstand grimy with dirt hung a broken mirror. This swung awry, so as to give a reflected view of a distant corner of the quarters. This gave Dupont, very suddenly, a sight of the occupant of that other room.

He was bent over, so that his phantom face was hidden. In all other particulars he seemed an ordinary human, built stockily and apparently possessing huge strength. To the ears of the watcher was conveyed a grim toneless chant of some sort, a tuneless muttered dirge which came of necessity from lips of real substance. From an open chest he produced, rather abruptly, a heavy machete with glittering blade. He felt the edge with a thumb, carefully. Then he rose.

Dupont nerved himself, putting the power of his will into his glance. Never before had he

attempted to gain the ascendancy over another by hypnotism through a mirror. He was not sure it could be done. But in his mind was little doubt that the weapon was intended for him, that he had been brought to this place to be exposed to the will of this creature. His hands were strapped behind him still. Once the phantom-faced man entered his room he would have, in all probability, insufficient time to bring his power to bear. So he bent all his purpose to his glance, focused upon the other through the mirror.

Slowly, slowly the Phantom Face turned. Controlling his horror, Dupont affirmed, over and over, the statement that the creature was subject to him. Out of the opalescent mass of nothing which should have been face there formed, slowly, eyes. Into these came terror, then surrender.

"You are helpless," Dupont stated. "You are sleepy. You are going over to your bed. You are going to lie down and sleep."

With childlike obedience the phantom-faced man obeyed. Thereupon Dupont finished the burning of his bonds; he escaped from the building. With no thought of anything but the safety of Violet he hurried to the nearest little hamlet, phoning to the house of Doctor Sutton. From Katy he learned that Doctor Sutton and the police already had rushed off to raid the House of Horrors, following him. Katy had heard no more from them.

Chartering a machine, Dupont speeded to the old mansion. He arrived in time to accompany the raiding party as they broke in. Inside there was not the slightest sign or indication of any occupant. As though warned in advance, the gang had fled. Not a paper, nor a bit of clothing; not any sort of clue had been left behind. The house was deserted.

Some distance away the police picked up a farmer's boy who had seen a machine drive from the place, hurriedly, a short time before. It had gone in the direction Dupont had taken. Were the gang moving Violet to the old chemical works? With unhappy premonition Dupont led the way back in his chartered machine. Within a mile he detected a vast column of smoke. Within half a mile he saw flames which were fed by dry wood soaked in chemicals. Driving as close as he dared he heard, suddenly, a woman's scream of pain and terror. He thought he recognized the voice of Violet.

VI

DEVIL'S CHOICE

VIOLET looked at the hunchback in dismay, finding little to reassure her in the grim piggishness of his expression.

"I—I can't stand on my ankle," she pleaded, uneasily. "I can't walk."

"Sorry, lady," wheezed the little man. As he spoke he winked heavily, but it was a question whether it was not an involuntary twitching of his flabby face. "Orders are for you to come along with me quietly and nicely, or else I carry you."

She glanced about in her helplessness. In contrast with what might lie before her this spacious and luxurious bedroom in the House of Horrors seemed almost homelike. But the open drawers of the chiffonier reminded her that her clothes had been taken away already. She remembered the stern-visaged female who had packed them, ruthlessly, in a battered telescope bag. She realized that protests were useless, yet to submit without a struggle—

"I don't see why I should have to leave!" All

at once she flushed. "They brought me here; they fixed this place up for me. I—I won't go!"

The hunchback grinned. He advanced toward her, spreading out corded arms to pick her up. The flesh of his torso heaved as he waddled on legs too short to carry him with any other sort of gait. The idea of resting in his grasp became so suddenly repulsive to her that she jumped up with a cry. She forgot completely the wrench of her ankle. She limped toward the door, all thought of resistance gone from her.

By the side of the house a limousine was waiting. Vera Collins hurried up, pushed her in, and blindfolded her. Then she was placed on the rear seat between Vera and the hunchback. Afterward several others clambered in. Almost immediately they were off at high speed.

Of the destination she could form no conception. The floors beneath her feet were wood and in spots they gave beneath her weight. She was taken up one flight of steps and these were steep and wabbly. Finally she was shoved into a room, roughly. A huge bolt on the door behind her was shot into place with a protesting creak and snap. She sensed that she was alone.

Tearing off the blindfold she looked about eagerly. The walls were unfinished timber. There was no furniture or loose object of any description in the room. The only window was boarded from bottom to top.

Before she could make up her mind to any course of action there was a new noise at the door. She looked up hopefully. Then her face fell as Carl Canfield entered; she felt with renewed poignancy the utter hopelessness of her situation.

He smiled. Evidently he was making an effort to be patient with her, to show the better side of his character. In his hand was a length of thin stout hemp rope, which he twirled nervously. Behind him the door was ajar.

"Listen, Miss Bronson," he began, "I'm not half so bad as you think, and—and I mean to treat you decent if you give me a chance, honest—"

He put a hand on her arm and somehow she caught a radiation of sincerity from the man. For just the slightest instant she forgot the wolfish drawing of his lips back over his teeth, or perhaps her feeling of helplessness influenced her. She made no motion to draw away or protect herself.

"You've got a choice, girlie," he went on. "If you'll marry me you will be safe, you will have everything you wish—"

She shrugged her shoulders, almost listless in her despair. "If I don't?"

He scowled, hesitating. Then suddenly he sniffed at the air. His eyes glistened, the devil in them. "Smell!" he commanded.

It was unmistakable. Her heart dropped. Something was burning. She knew intuitively that the building was fired; that her fate was

death in this trap of obvious tinder if she refused him.

"You'll burn alive!" he muttered, leaning close. "That pretty head of yours will feed the flames. It—it'll be hell, cutie!"

She wanted to strike him again. She wished to display her contempt, to make him think she felt no fear. But stark terror paralyzed her muscles. He leaned close, very close, and she could not move.

All at once something whizzed through the air, missing his face by the tiniest fraction of an inch. Striking the wall, sticking there in mute testimony, humming as it quivered from the force of the impact, was a short, sharp, thick-handled knife.

He blanched, drawing back. Violet, released from the spell, glanced toward the door, but saw no one. Then Canfield woke to action. His expression became black. He started for her and she ran a hopeless flight in the narrow confines of the room. Catching, seizing her, he bound her hands behind her hastily with the bit of rope and flung her to the floor. Without another glance he hurried out, bolting the door.

Already thin wisps of smoke were working their way through the cracks of the floor and walls. She struggled to her feet, coughing, and seeking to unfasten the rope behind her back. Fortunately she had been tied in a hurry. But her lungs were aching as she freed her hands,

as she tried vainly to bend her weight against the door, as she turned to the window.

She found one loose board, managing to pull it off. In the aperture she gasped at the fresh air, gratefully. Meanwhile the room had become hot, suffocating. It seemed to her that the fire would reach her any moment. Perspiring, choking, using the one board as a lever upon the others, she uncovered enough of the window to allow the passage of her body. Then she broke out the glass and clambered through just as the first blazing tongue of flame burst into the room behind her.

At first she thought all further escape blocked. Below her was a sheer drop of twenty feet. Behind her the building had become a furnace. She glanced out and in the distance saw an automobile. She screamed.

As the car crawled up she recognized Robert Dupont. Though the fire behind scorched her hands she clung on, in full faith that he would rescue her. She saw him clamber to the top of the car, bracing himself. Then the chauffeur drove in, quickly, skillfully, through the dancing flames. Dupont called to her to jump as he passed. She obeyed. A moment later she was safe in his arms, in the machine, her burns cooled by the breeze created as they sped away from the scene of her horror.

"My Robert!" she exclaimed. "My own dear Robert!"

VII

THE PORTRAIT

DUPONT leaned forward with sudden inspiration, pounding for emphasis upon the little stand where Doctor Sutton was conducting an experiment half-heartedly.

"One thing is sure, and that is that Violet will never be safe, really safe, out here in Lawncrest. Now suppose we all moved into the city for a little while—" He paused, hopefully.

The older man leaned back, thoughtful. "I'm not so sure, Robert," he objected. "We have the special guard now, sleeping in the next room, and you are out here, too."

"Mike's all right," agreed Dupont. "The detective agency has had him on its staff for years and Katy knows him, but remember that the gang came last time four strong. They didn't hesitate to shoot poor old Dewey."

"There are the two dogs," added Sutton, "to give the alarm."

"You can poison watchdogs, and—well, I'd feel easier in some big apartment building where

they couldn't get away with murder as they can on a big open country place isolated like this."

"Do—do you think they will attempt deliberate, cold-blooded murder now?"

"I do!" Dupont rose, striding up and down. "I'm sure that that man with the deformed face was after me with the machete; and Violet—they tied her up and set the building on fire. That means they'll do anything."

Doctor Sutton was uneasy. "I'm afraid of what may happen, Robert," he admitted. "I—I don't know what to think."

After a few restless turns of the room Dupont resumed his seat. "Is Violet able to stand the trip? Do you think we could make arrangements to-morrow?"

"Her burns are very slight; the wrench of the ankle nothing. She simply needs rest, a sense of security. She fell asleep, or I would have let you see her."

"For her sake, then, we ought to go in where it would be safer."

"Well"—Sutton gave in reluctantly—"all right. Have you a place in mind? Your rooms are too small."

"I'll—I'll have to hunt up an apartment. But meanwhile you can get ready. I'll have my man, Dacca, and we can take Mike for extra protection, and one of the dogs. Then—then I'll be able to sleep soundly."

Sutton in turn rose, pacing the room. Finally he pulled his chair very close to Dupont's, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"There's another matter, Robert; another reason why I would have preferred to stay out here." He fiddled, nervously, with his watch chain.

"What is that?" Dupont's voice was reassuring. Already he felt a sense of relief at Doctor Sutton's acquiescence in his plan.

"I—I know you will think I am foolish, superstitious, perhaps, but I have a feeling that everything we do, everything we say, is known to this mysterious band of enemies who are threatening us. I—I have felt that this other matter was safe so long as I mentioned nothing about it, but now—now I must tell you, must ask your advice."

"No one can overhear us. I know enough about thought transference and mental telepathy to know that any secret is safe which you whisper to me here now."

"I'm not so sure, Robert. The natives of tropical America do some wonderful things, some inexplicable things. I'm not so sure that science has even begun to scratch the field of occultism."

"What is this other matter?" Dupont was direct, in his impatience.

Sutton looked about. "They are threatening

Violet, and you, Robert. From those warning notes it has something to do with the secret, the will of Violet's father. But Violet was not the only thing intrusted to my care. I carried away also a portrait, a portrait of her father's partner, Steele, painted by her mother just before she died. If this band learns that, or if they know that, I believe they will be just as anxious to steal or destroy the portrait as to injure Violet herself. And I gave my word to a dying man that I would guard it just as faithfully as I guarded his child."

"It must have some particular value, then."

"Not that I know of. But it is a trust."

"Well, that's easy." Dupont smiled. "When we move in we can take the portrait along."

Sutton shook his head. "Immediately, if they are watching us as they must be, they would know the painting has some value and would bend their efforts against it."

"Just because we brought a picture with us?"

"It is a portrait of the man who practically killed Violet's father. We wouldn't keep such a picture unless it had some hidden value."

Dupont nodded. After a moment he saw the solution of the difficulty. "In the city you will have Dacca and myself to guard Violet, and that will be enough precaution. Leave Mike out here to guard the picture. There should be some man in the house with Katy and the cook any-

way. The chauffeur will be in the city most of the time also."

Doctor Sutton brightened. It was the sensible arrangement.

At that moment Katy appeared in the door. "Phone, Mr. Robert!"

Puzzled, for it was late, Dupont went into the hall, taking the receiver. "Yes?"

"This is Nerva, Doctor!"

"Who?"

"Nerva, the hypnotist, Don't you remember me, or"—banteringly—"perhaps you haven't any professional jealousy."

He smiled. The girl was a commercial fortune-teller of the better class, mixing a large percentage of charlatanism with genuine phenomena. Early in his studies he had taken an interest in her séances, attempting to separate the truth from its setting of trickery. He remembered in particular her magnificent apartment, a duplex studio suite; he wondered anew at the production of an income to allow the luxury in which she lived.

"Of course I know you," he explained. "I was only surprised to have you call me up out here."

"That's a testimony to my power," she laughed. "By and by you'll credit my psychic gifts."

"What—just what do you want?"

"Why when I met you on the street some time ago you said something about going to marry

this month; that you were looking for quarters I'm leaving for Europe, very suddenly, and I want to rent my studio."

Surprised, then elated at the fortunate coincidence, he inquired terms, accepted them, and arranged to move in the second following day. After the exchange of final pleasantries he hurried in to tell Doctor Sutton of his luck.

The older man, delighted at first, frowned as he thought the matter over. "It's distinctly remarkable," he murmured, finally.

Dupont failed to catch the note of foreboding in the other's remark. He was frankly jubilant.

"It's more than remarkable," he exclaimed. "It's wonderful!"

VIII

EVER-STALKING DEATH

MIKE settled into the capacious depths of the easy-chair with a grunt not only expressive of present heart-felt happiness but indicative of his realization that this was the beginning of many good things to come. In his career as private detective and watchman, in his brief but glorious role as guardian of democracy, he had known a little of nearly every sort of hardship. Seldom were his assignments from the agency as quiet or as comfortable as this. If rain or storm or cold were not threatening his well-being he was apt to be face to face with danger of a more menacing sort. At the very least his routine was dull and dry and ploddingly monotonous.

But now! He squirmed in the cushions of his chair, settling his weight in the yielding softness. With a lazy toe he hooked a little taboret, dragging it close to prop his feet upon it. He lighted a cigar, abstracted as a matter of course from Doctor Sutton's humidor. Finding an accommodating ridge of velvet at his neck

he laid his head back, blowing great clouds of philosophic smoke.

Somewhere within him were great quantities of food—dishes which had tickled his palate in the most satisfying manner. It was the first day following the exodus of Violet and Doctor Sutton, Doctor Dupont and Dacca. Cook had spread herself. For Mike and the chauffeur and Katy she had prepared a banquet. And Mike was grateful.

But even that was not all. For many months he had known Katy, and at scattered intervals had seen her. Until chance brought him under the same roof with the girl he had hardly dared that any wild dreams of his might have been duplicated in her youthful, pretty, and altogether willful head. Yet such was the case. Only that afternoon she had nodded to his question, coloring in her surrender. He had held her in his arms. He had searched out and found and conquered her lips.

Too, he had told her of the little cottage. It was only a patch of land, but it was a home, and Mike had had designs upon it for the better part of a season. As he described it Katy's eyes widened and softened, head leaning against his shoulder. With a girl like that to work for—!

But what a foolish task it was that held him now. To guard a picture! Mike's glance was scornful as he looked at the painting on the

wall before him. Somehow the portrait irritated him. Something in the eyes of the subject angered him whenever he saw them.

"Sure, and he was a mean gazabo," he muttered, audibly. Then he added, with a touch of malice, "It isn't art, by jinks!"

The idea that the particular spread of canvas needed protection was preposterous. So, with the good dinner within him, he closed his eyes in solid comfort.

Then a slight noise caught him, waking him to alertness. He did not move, but he was conscious of a faint scratching at the window. Soon he heard soft, cautious footfalls on the carpet. Waiting, hidden in the recesses of the great easy-chair, he turned his head slightly, to watch.

The intruder seemed to believe himself alone. He was unmasked, and his weapons, if he carried any, were concealed. His clothes seemed to indicate a moderate station in life; at least he was not the obvious thief. With assurance he walked straight over to the portrait, pausing to look at it in the dim diffused light from the table lamp. Until he smiled he gave no particular impression of criminal intent. But when he did his lips slipped back over ugly tusk-like teeth. His expression was canine, almost a snarl. To the watchman, not unskilled in character reading, the intruder's face carried the smirk of a wolf at the first clear whiff of sheep.

For just a moment the man hesitated. Then he whipped out a short sharp knife, prepared to slit the canvas from its frame. With a cry Mike sprang up, drawing his revolver. The other, though surprised, displayed no lack of courage. In an instant they grappled.

Back, forward, overturning chairs, lurching against the wall with sufficient force to jar an ornament from its shelf, each sought for an advantage, Mike to use his weapon, the gangster to stab with his knife. Mike was strong but the other man possessed superstrength. Gradually, slowly but effectually, the intruder gained a slight ascendancy. In sudden realization of his growing helplessness Mike called out, hoping the chauffeur might hear and so come to his assistance. The expenditure of breath cost much of his needed force. In sheer desperation he twisted suddenly, turning his automatic and pulling the trigger.

A laugh was the answer. The bullet had gone wild. Then, powerless to protect himself for many moments more, he saw above his eyes, the poised knife of his enemy. Bit by bit it descended. As an inaudible prayer rose to his lips it struck, and with sickening ease sank to its hilt in his chest. He was conscious only of a half wondering glance down at the handle of the knife. He knew, were it drawn, it would mean his death. He knew it meant his death in a few minutes in any case. Next all became black before him.

The other man rose, glancing at the motionless prone figure of the watchman. The knife which he had used to stab him had been intended for the slashing of the canvas from its frame. He hesitated. Finally he shrugged his shoulders. He drew a small penknife from his pocket, opening it rather disgustedly.

At that moment there came from the hallway the sound of rushing skirts. Katy! The rustle of the starched petticoats of the Irish girl was unmistakable. For only an instant did the intruder wait. Perhaps he remembered her lusty wielding of a poker on a previous occasion. He turned and fled through the window, out again into the night.

IX

PSYCHIC SIGNATURES

NERVA'S apartment entranced Violet, proved in the half day of her occupation a never-ending source of delight. Her first thought was the comfort of Doctor Sutton and Dupont. Then she settled to her enjoyment.

The crowning feature was a huge studio room which rose to the height of two full floors. Long casement windows looked down upon the bustling traffic of one of the city's busiest cross streets. At one side of the room stairs rose to a balcony, equipped with cushioned seats between the doors to the bedrooms. There were three upper chambers, two en suite with a bath adjoining, which she assigned to the men, and one slightly smaller room in front with a single bath which she thought most suitable for herself. On the level of the studio floor were the kitchen and pantry; also tiny but complete quarters for Dacca, and an alcove den fitted up by Nerva for her individual consultations. All the furnishings were oriental, lavishly rich and ornate. Nothing necessary for the comfort of the three was missing.

But for a certain somber impression given by the sheer splendor of the interior their situation would have been ideal.

Immediately after supper, a meal wherein their one servant demonstrated unexpected ability as a cook, Violet hurried over to the cushions by an open casement, drawing up her knees and leaning back in content.

Dupont stopped to congratulate the black, who emerged from his domain to clear the table.

"Dacca!" he exclaimed, "I believe you're a better chef than valet."

The eyes of the man traveled around to Doctor Sutton, lighting suddenly. He was a native Dominican, one of two brothers brought from Santo Domingo by the doctor on his return with baby Violet from the ill-fated Venezuelan expedition. Both had been trained by Sutton. Dacca had been taken by Dupont on a trip to the American tropics, when the hypnotist first undertook to investigate voodooism among the blacks. Since, he had remained as the personal servant of the younger man, although his brother, kept by Sutton, had died a year or so later. His loyalty toward the elder scientist, however, never wavered.

Sutton smiled. "You like to have us all one family, don't you?"

Dacca nodded very vigorously.

With a sudden thought Dupont hurried over

to Violet. The warm red glow of the setting sun, striking the windows of a tall hotel across and giving it a hundred gleaming eyes, was reflected squarely upon her. Her yellow hair became gold, a strange, rare, ruddy gold fresh from the crucible of a master alchemist. The glistening strands waved about the gentle contour of her cheek and throat, framing the soft happiness of her features. He settled by her carefully, as if she were a fragile thing worth more than all the gold the sun could make. He slipped an arm about her, leaning close to whisper.

"I love you!"

She gave her lips and the picture was spoiled. He didn't care. Pushing her away after just a moment he became quite serious.

"I think we are very safe here, Violet. Dacca would throw his life away before he would permit any harm to come to you, to any of us. The dog is a Belgian police hound, bred in the trenches and utterly fearless. This is one of the exclusive studio apartment buildings of the city. Yet there is one more thing we should do, you and I should do."

She guessed it. "Always impatient!" she teased.

"If we are married, Violet, you need never be away from my side until the danger is over. Why should we wait?"

"Wouldn't it be fun!" She too was eager.

"Suppose we stole off and got the license? We could phone a minister to come here and—and it would be a big surprise to Doctor Daddy—"

"We'll go downtown first thing in the morning," he said.

She was silent. Then slowly a frown stole into her eyes. "I'll be glad when it is to-morrow."

"Why?" He saw that her thoughts had strayed from the wedding.

"I'm afraid—tonight!"

His expression darkened. "I'm sorry all those people will be here, but it can't be helped. Nerva's boat postponed its sailing another day. She has a room at the hotel, so as not to inconvenience us, but when she was asked to give a séance she could hardly crowd her friends in a little bedroom; it was not much for her to ask us to let her give it here."

"Will there be many people?"

"She said maybe a dozen, perhaps only nine or ten."

"Could—couldn't you take me to a theater, Robert, or to a movie show, so we wouldn't have to be here?"

He shook his head, smiling slightly. "That's where I would be afraid, Violet. Out on the street some one might shoot at you, from a covered automobile, or anything. A revolver with a Maxim silencer would never be heard. I don't think we ought to go out any more than necessary until after your birthday, and never at night."

"I—I'm afraid of these people coming here; more than I'm afraid of the street."

"But nothing can happen here."

"When you answered the telephone I had an awfully queer feeling. I thought I felt that cold wind sweeping down upon me, the terrible chilling air that swirled about me when I stood before the Cavern of the Skull in my nightmare."

He straightened a bit, concerned. "You ought to put that nightmare out of your mind," he scolded. "First thing you know you will become a prey to all kinds of dreams like that."

"But it was a true warning. I was in danger, and I am in danger, and it's all on account of something about that expedition up the Orinoco."

"That's no reason for keeping on thinking about it."

"But indeed it is!" She drew a little closer to him. "Remember how you told me once about signatures; how some intangible something about everyone on a subconscious plane would enable their influence to be recognized and disguises to be penetrated—"

"Of course. That, however—"

"Don't interrupt! In that nightmare I saw a fox, and a wolf, and a snake, and—and a horrible phantom face, and"— her voice sank to a whisper —"and Evil Eye! When I was kidnaped I woke up to find a woman bending over me. She pretended to be friendly but I had

dreamed part of the nightmare over again, about the snake, and she was the snake, Robert, because I overheard her later. Then the man who wanted me to marry him was the wolf—I could see it in his mouth—and the shadow on the wall was the phantom face—" She paused, shuddering. "The nightmare gave me their psychic signatures. Robert, and I—I'll be warned always!"

Suddenly he sobered. "The man who brought me that telegram in Philadelphia reminded me of a fox, Violet! I've just thought of it."

"You see!" she exclaimed. "Now when Nerva phoned I felt that awful wind and it's a warning, and—I'm afraid!"

He shook his head at that. "I've known Nerva for years. She's largely a fake, but she could hardly be connected with our enemies."

"Her friends, Robert! How do you know whom she's bringing?"

"Well!" He grinned. "Forewarned, you know! I'll speak to Dacca, and I'll have my automatic in my pocket, and—the advantage is all ours if anyone wants to start anything."

Nerva was the first to arrive. Violet sensed no great antipathy to the woman, rather to her surprise; instead her impressions were confused and disconcerting. Accompanying Nerva was a little excitable Frenchman, followed by a plainly dressed valet or attendant with a large heavy wooden box, highly polished. After the intro-

ductions Nerva led Dupont to the table where the box was placed. The others clustered about curiously.

"This is a hypnotic machine," she explained, "invented by Mr. Dupree, here, and demonstrated by him with great success in Paris. It is at his request that I have arranged for the test to-night."

Dupont turned to the Frenchman, who could speak no English, starting to question him in his own tongue. To Violet, on the lookout for every possible sign to justify her premonitions, it seemed as if this confused him. After several hurried answers he took up his hat, motioning to the man who had carried the box. Nerva hastened to explain for him.

"Mr. Dupree is not able to be present for the demonstration and so the séance will have to be in my charge." She accompanied him to the door; then returned after a conversation there in low tones which Dupont could not hear. "His man will return for the machine late to-night, or early in the morning—if that will be all right—"

"Surely!" Doctor Sutton spoke up, ever hospitable. "If there is any way at all in which we can assist you, Miss—Miss Nerva?"

She laughed, thanking him. "I hope all of you will remain down, to witness the test. You will find it very interesting, very interesting indeed."

Was it imagination? Violet was sure that the woman's eyes sought hers, subconsciously. Again, in the strange uncanny manner in which these impressions were borne in upon her highly sensitive subconscious self, she sensed the play about her for a moment of the thin chill astral breeze she had felt before. But of Nerva herself she received no definite impression or suggestion of enmity. The contradiction confused her. Perhaps, after all, she was giving too full rein to these vague impressions. Shaking off her fears she joined the others at the table, watching Nerva prepare the machine for the séance.

"How many are coming, Nerva?" Dupont asked.

The woman's expression clouded suddenly. "Oh, I'm terribly disappointed," she exclaimed. "Several people I counted upon have sent their regrets at the last moment. But"—she brightened—"the Chicago manufacturer I want particularly to interest in the making of the machines will be here, with his technical foreman. He is bringing the subject with him, so as to be sure there is no collusion. The girl, I believe, is his private secretary, or a relative, or something."

"And that is all?" Dupont suggested.

"Yes! With"—counting—"with you people it will be just seven, the number of cosmic completeness, the mystic seven."

Dupont shrugged his shoulders, amused. Violet

caught an element of huge reassurance in his eyes. After all he had taken her premonitions seriously, had feared some sort of plot with Nerva as a tool.

Almost at the same moment the bell rang. Dacca emerged from the pantry to admit the guests. The manufacturer was a pompous individual with full beard and glasses. In appearance he might have been an ambassador. His foreman was a slim, nervous type, obviously the mechanic, very evidently fond of the small mustache to which he gave a great deal of attention. Violet noticed that Dupont looked from one to the other curiously, and somehow baffled. Then the genuine beauty of the girl caught and held her own attention.

"I'm convinced," the manufacturer stated, ponderously, "that all the stuff is fake, ninety-nine per cent of it. So I've arranged a test, Miss Nerva, which alone will sell me on your machine. You will stand against the wall and with the machine hypnotize Miss Lewis, my secretary and adopted daughter. I have brought several knives, of the sort used by knife throwers in vaudeville shows. After you have hypnotized Miss Lewis you will stand and direct her will in throwing the knives at you. If she pins your dress between the arms and between your knees without hurting you, I buy the machine, and manufacture it for you. If you are afraid of this test I know you are

a fake, because I know people in a genuine hypnotic state are accurate to such an extent that if you really put Miss Lewis under your control you will have no fear of harm from the knives."

An expression almost malicious showed in his face in spite of his beard. Violet saw a look of wonderment on Dupont's face and knew it was a test to which he probably would not submit himself. Then she turned to Nerva. Slowly, very slowly, the woman's expression cleared.

"It's a fair test," she stated. "I'm not afraid."

Assisted by Violet and Dacca she arranged a long, wooden, kitchen table, on end. She started the machine, arranged the subject, put the knives within reach, and then coolly took her place as a living target in the test. Violet, standing near, was fascinated. For a while she watched the whirring disks, until she grasped, just in time, that she was being hypnotized herself. She turned toward the manufacturer. Suddenly she realized that in some manner the machine had sharpened her psychic faculty. All at once she saw his face, not as the face of a man, but as the features of an animal. In fear, in terror, she called out to Dupont.

"Robert! Robert! The fox!"

Then something impelled her gaze and she turned to see Miss Lewis, the first knife in hand, raising her arm. Though the girl was blond, though all the art of make-up had been invoked

to change her, Violet knew her in that moment. It was Vera Collins! She knew, because she saw the head of a snake, its beady eyes glittering, its long, venomous tongue protruding toward her.

In a flash her sight returned to normal. The supposed hypnotic subject was just about to throw the first knife. The blade was poised, ready for flight. The sharp, shiny point, was aimed, not at Nerva and the upturned table, but directly at the heart of Violet Bronson. She tried to cry, and could not gasp for breath. She strove to move and found herself frozen, held to the spot in horror.

X

THE WAR OF WILLS

NOT until Violet's sharp, terrified cry, of "Robert! Robert! The fox!" did Dupont place the puzzling sense of familiarity clinging to the supposed manufacturer. Then he recognized him in spite of beard, in spite of eyeglasses with their black silk cord, in spite of the assumed pompous and ponderous manner and disguised voice of the man. Even the name flashed into his memory. It was Dick Renard, a member of the band of enemies threatening them, Renard, the interne who had brought the false telegram to him in Philadelphia, Renard, the gangster, who had knocked him out and had carried him, a prisoner, to the abandoned chemical works, there to be left at the mercy of the phantom-faced monster and his machete. With quick second thought Dupont glanced toward Renard's companion, posing as the manufacturer's foreman. Now there was no mistaking Boggs, the chauffeur.

Violet's intuitive fears had been more than justified. In less than a moment Dupont understood the plot and caught the menace. The presumed

subject of the test was only pretending to be hypnotized. In her hand the first of the knives gleamed evilly. From where he stood Dupont could see clearly that her target was not Nerva, on whose lips appeared now a slight triumphantly cruel smile, but Violet. The muscles of her arm, revealed when the thin sleeve of her waist slipped back upon her shoulder, suggested a practiced certainty in the use of a weapon in this manner. Undoubtedly she was the Vera Collins of whom Violet had told him. Back in the dim recesses of his recollection was the figure of a woman in vaudeville, a thrower of knives once concerned in the spectacular murder of a fellow artist. Though she had been acquitted, though her hair had been dark, black—

Before the poised blade Violet stood rooted, frozen to the spot in fright. At her cry Doctor Sutton rose. Immediately Boggs, who had strolled toward him casually many moments before, seized his arms, pinning him and holding him helpless. All this happened in the brief instant intervening between the cry and Dupont's recognition of the members of the gang. He reached for his automatic, but before his hand could close upon the butt in his pocket, Renard covered him.

"Don't you move!" muttered the fox, in a hissing undertone. "A single twitch, and you die with the girl!"

For some incomprehensible reason Vera hesitated still before casting the weapon. Perhaps it

was the sheer immobility of Violet, the helplessness of the slender, swaying form, the silence of full red, girlish lips, the fright in eyes widely dilated. The hesitation cost the plotters their success, cost Nerva her life. That one moment was sufficient for the power of Dupont's will. With a moment he saved the girl he loved.

Upon Vera he directed the whole of his mental force, the driving intensity of his well-trained mind. He could not catch her glance because her back was toward him. No ordinary phenomenon of hypnotism would serve him here. No use to attempt to bring Renard under his control, nor Nerva, nor even the chauffeur, Boggs. A matter of an instant might be too late to stop the throw of the knife. Dupont now was not the hypnotist. To protect Violet he must depend upon telepathy. Through the set crystallization of Vera's purpose he must throw his own will, checking any execution of her wishes by the motor area of her brain. No movement of his lips, no betraying contraction of his eyes revealed this effort of mind to Renard as he repeated over and over, in his consciousness, the command to hers.

"You will not move that arm! You will not move that arm!"

Vera wavered. A certain growing, puzzled uncertainty was displayed in her attitude. Inwardly Dupont exulted, sure that the battle was his. All at once, however, he felt a new influence.

While he bent his power upon Vera a strange, malignant, evil wave of thought now swept down upon him, directed from some spot outside the studio where the drama was being enacted, seeking to counteract the mental pressure he brought to bear upon the girl. It was will against his will. It was a war of wills.

He recognized the other force as the same which had encompassed him during his demonstration in Philadelphia. Because he had conquered it then he did not fear it now. But he wondered at the identity of this hidden, invisible enemy. He wondered if these others were merely pawns in the hands of a superior intelligence. Whose was the Mystery Mind, now twice revealed to him?

From behind the curtains of the open den the short, sharp bark of the dog broke in upon the silence. There he had been tied so as not to intrude upon the séance. Less than a minute had elapsed since Dupont first directed the thought-power against Vera, yet the canny animal sensed the vibrant intensity of the atmosphere and voiced his protest.

Immediately there was a rush. From the kitchen the soft-footed Dacca darted. Instantaneously he grasped the danger to Violet, leaping toward her.

Vera, waking to action, shook off the spell upon her. A momentary glance at the direction of the intrusion and she sent the knife whirring from her hand, a glistening streak of steel. There was a sharp cry from a woman's throat as the weapon

struck its mark. Following came a gurgle, cut short, and the dull plump of a body falling to the carpet. 'Nerva, not Violet, was the victim. Vera's aim had been disturbed by the frightened look aside.

Dupont took advantage of Renard's confusion to leap forward, grappling with him. The struggle carried them against the rounded lower step of the flight leading to the balcony. Together they fell to the floor, arms locked, both seeking to get at the weapons in their pockets.

Dacca, eyes burning in fury, leaped upon Vera, bearing her back against the heavy center table. His fingers sought her throat. There was no hint of mercy in his expression. Boggs, felling Doctor Sutton brutally, leaped to her assistance. His blow at the negro hit glancingly, so that Dacca was stunned, but suffered no injury. While Vera fled to the door, opening it, Boggs rushed to the aid of Renard. Dupont, disconcerted, allowed the fox to escape his grasp. Before he could ward off the blow Boggs struck him down, and the two men, joining Vera, slipped into the hall and down and out upon the street too quickly for an alarm to be raised.

Neither Sutton nor Dupont were hurt. The old scientist hastened to the side of Violet as soon as he recovered his faculties, but she was simply shaken. For a second time since the receipt of the threatening notes the daughter of Richard Bronson and his heiress had escaped death.

On the floor, forgotten, was the owner of this

apartment, the girl who had lured them into the trap. Suddenly she raised herself to an elbow, gasping, calling to Dupont.

"Forgive me," she whispered, clinging to him convulsively. "I did it through jealousy. You —you never would pay any attention to me—"

He started. He had hardly even spoken to her; they had barely been acquainted. Then he stiffened. "What about the others? What about Renard, and Vera Collins, and the chauffeur, Boggs? Why did they attempt to kill Miss Bronson? Why do they want to put me out of the way?"

Nerva looked up, her eyes very clear. He knew she would not lie to him now; that she was sorry for her part in the plot.

"I—I don't know," she said, weakly. "They bribed me to help. They—they agreed to pay me—to pay me—" Even dying she could not, in her shame, name the amount.

"Is it a gang?" He was ruthless in his quest for information.

"Yes!"

"Who is the leader?"

She shuddered. Her voice was a whisper. "Phantom Face!"

"Is there—" he looked about—"is there anything you can tell us, any particular warning you can give? Do you know any of their plans?"

Very suddenly her eyes dilated. She attempted

to rise. "Yes! You must beware of—" A sudden fit of coughing stopped her. After a bit she made another attempt. "Beware of—" But she was too far gone. Her voice trailed off. Then she collapsed, went limp in his arms.

They carried her into the den where she had tried so many times to pierce the veil between two worlds. Dacca took the dog to the kitchen. Violet stumbled up to her room, to shut out the horror of it. The men, sober, straightened out the studio, removing all signs and indications of the tragic séance.

"Robert!" Doctor Sutton was the first to speak. "Hadn't—hadn't we better move again in the morning, perhaps return to Lawncrest?"

Dupont shook his head. "We are safer here. The danger here is over now. Out at Lawncrest—"

"We have the special watchman at Lawncrest," insisted the older man. "We can get several other guards if you think it advisable. Violet—" he glanced up toward the balcony—"Violet will never be easy here, now."

At that moment the telephone rang. Dacca called Doctor Sutton, who answered with an expression of surprise. Finally he returned to Dupont, very grave.

"It was from Lawncrest. A man attempted to steal the portrait and they have his description. Though he failed he—he stabbed the watchman and—the watchman is dead."

XI

A NEW CLUE

AT breakfast the decision was made to remain in the apartment of the unfortunate Nerva, at least until after Violet's eighteenth birthday, or until the mystery overshadowing them was solved. Sutton and Dupont ate alone. Dacca arranged a tray temptingly, setting the dishes out upon the whitest of linen, and stole softly up to Violet's room. Some time later he brought it back, untouched.

Shortly after eleven the chauffeur arrived from Lawncrest, bringing the portrait of Steele wrapped carefully in newspapers and burlap, escorted by two policemen to whom the care given the picture seemed foolishness. All morning Dupont had exchanged not more than a dozen words with Doctor Sutton. Now he helped the scientist select the place upon the wall for the painting, assisted in the hanging of the heavy frame, and in silence. He watched Sutton leave for Lawncrest, there to attend the hearing to be held upon the death of the watchman.

For an hour he paced up and down the floor

of the studio. Nerva had said that the leader of the band of their enemies was "Phantom Face." That individual was fresh in the memory of Dupont. In addition to Phantom Face he knew and could recognize Dick Renard the fox, Vera Collins, whom Violet termed the snake, and Boggs, the chauffeur and companion of Renard. From Violet he knew of Carl Canfield, unquestionably the man who had stabbed the guard at Lawncrest, and of a hunchback, and a hatchet-faced woman, the latter probably servants of the others. It was a formidable gang.

Dupont hesitated at accepting Phantom Face as the real leader. In the attacks upon Violet and himself there had been careful, detailed planning which involved days and perhaps weeks of preliminary arrangement. Unquestionably, Nerva had been bribed and bent to the wishes of the band, or at the least had been approached and was known to be susceptible to the bribes they offered, long before Violet's escape from the House of Horrors. Only a few hours had elapsed between the rescue of the girl from the burning chemical works and the phone message from Nerva. It was inconceivable that the gang could have planned and prepared the scheme, and made arrangements with Nerva, in so short a time.

Further proof of the fact was Nerva's last few words. She had attempted, though in vain, to warn Dupont of some further trap set for Violet and him-

self. This was arranged, had been arranged of necessity before the beginning of the séance, before it could be known whether or not Vera would succeed in killing Violet with the thrown knife.

Not only were the plots very evidently prepared so that if one failed others would be ready, but they were so conceived that the police and the authorities would be without a clue in case of success. Had Violet perished in the fire there would have been no trace of her; the heat of the blazing chemicals would have left only charred bones, beyond identification. Had Vera's knife found its mark it would have been impossible to know definitely that the séance was not genuine, the death an accident, for the supposed manufacturer would have dropped from sight, the supposed subject would have fled. Dupont remembered that Renard, enough of an actor to deceive both Violet and himself in his latest role, previously had assumed the guise of a hospital interne. More, he had gained unquestioned admittance to a very exclusive and unheralded demonstration.

He felt that he must not underrate in any way the skill and science of his enemies. But could the phantom-faced creature be the head? He felt not. He was sure that some master brain was behind the attempts upon the life and happiness of Violet and himself. Into his recollection flashed the strange, malignant mental force which twice had sought to hamper him, which had

grappled with his will upon some unknown psychic plane. There was a hidden invisible leader somewhere. Directing everything was a Mystery Mind. Was it Evil Eye, of whom Violet had dreamed?

At noon Violet emerged from her room, descending the stairs slowly. Dupont rushed to her side, concerned, eager to comfort her, but she held him away from her. She was dressed in a simple morning gown of clinging gray crêpe. Her hair she had merely twisted into an old-fashioned psyche knot. There were circles under her eyes and she showed signs of her sleepless night. Yet she was beautiful always, so that a deep pride glowed within him.

"Violet, dear"—he began.

"Please!" Again she pushed him away.

"But this morning we are going to—"

"Please, Robert!" She dropped to the window seat, by him. "That is what I want to tell you. I—I can't marry you."

His heart dropped. He looked at her in amazement. "You mean—you mean you don't love me?"

Impulsively she slipped a soft little hand in his. He knew that that wasn't the reason. He forbore questioning her, waiting for her explanation.

"It's because I would only lead you into danger," she said, finally. "Perhaps later, when everything is over"—she looked away—"but now—"

He shook his head impatiently. "That's nonsense, Violet! What is the use of my love if I cannot protect you?"

She rose. A far-away look came into her eyes. "It isn't right that I should lead you into danger," she insisted, almost listlessly.

He flushed with indignant protest. Now she was wholly unreasonable. As she turned away he felt a surge of determination. He put an arm about her, drawing her to him by force, compelling her attention as he held her in his embrace. After all, should he not take control of things, protect her in spite of all her little, fine feminine scruples?

Her eyes dilated. She struggled, trembling, upset completely by his resort to masculine strength. Both were on edge, nerves rubbed raw by the terrible menace hanging over them, by the swift moves of grim fate, by the three times climax of sudden death. Any sort of understanding for the moment was impossible. Under other circumstances Dupont would have recognized, understood, and humored her mood, simply a spell of depression. But he held her, determined to bend her to his will.

Suddenly, unable to free herself otherwise, she raised her arm abruptly and slapped him, as sharply as she could. Amazed, he released her. She rushed half up the steps; then turned. Had there been any softness in his expression she might have melted. He was angry, however. She burst into tears and continued up, and into her room, slamming the door.

After a moment he followed, ashamed of himself, prepared to make amends for his roughness. In answer to his knock she appeared with reddened eyes. Her little fists were clenched, her glance hard and cold.

"I'll never marry you now, Robert Dupont!" she exclaimed. "Never! Never! Never!"

Closing the door in his face, she locked it. Though he pleaded and coaxed she paid no further attention to him.

Finally he became angry in earnest. He stormed down to the studio, grasped his hat viciously, and hurried out. Without waiting for the elevator he raced down the steps, to the street. Elbowing his way through the crush of noon traffic he made his way to Broadway, then up to Fifty-ninth, and into Central Park. His steps took him by a wandering route to a point of rock overlooking the swan boats, the children romping by the side of the pond, the towering hotels and apartments of the upper Fifth Avenue section. Here he flopped, desperately unhappy.

In the open air, however, he regained his perspective rapidly. He saw that Violet, after all, was only upset. And with the realization there came a most disquieting thought, for he had rushed off and left her in the apartment with no protection but Dacca. He had not even stopped to make sure that Dacca was there. What a fool he was!

He hurried back, madly. In the studio there

was no sign of his man. Though Violet's door was locked there was no response from her. In mounting terror he prepared to break into her room, not sure but he would find her gone.

At that moment Dacca returned below, in obvious excitement.

"Where is Violet?" demanded Dupont.

Dacca indicated the door.

"Will you let me alone?" came through the panel in almost a nervous scream.

Relieved, yet upset by her attitude, he descended from the balcony to question the black.

"Kali is here," explained Dacca. "He wants to see the 'witch doctor,' what they call Doctor Sutton up"—unconsciously Dacca lowered his voice—"up the Orinoco. He—he says he has the secret of Miss Violet's birth, and the treasure."

"Kali?" Dupont was puzzled.

Doctor Sutton himself entered in time to hear the message and make the explanation. Everything at Lawncrest arranged, the scientist had speeded back to be sure nothing had happened to Violet and Dupont.

"Kali," he told Dupont, "is the son of the friendly native chief who helped me get down the river with Violet. Kali's mother had a hard time at his birth and I guess I saved both mother and child. The chief has always been grateful. He sent men with me when I tried to locate the treasure, to keep Steele from finding it."

"You think he might send his son all the way to the United States to bring you a message?"

"Possibly!" Sutton was thoughtful.

Dupont turned to Dacca. "Why didn't he come up? Why didn't he wait here?"

"Kali says the devil men watch him. They would kill him if they saw him come here to see the 'witch doctor.'"

"He didn't know you."

"He says he has watched, out in the country, and here. He spoke to me in the market, told me to give the message to"—Dacca smiled at the other black's superstition—"to the 'witch doctor.'"

"Where am I to see him?" This was Doctor Sutton.

Dacca's respect for the two men he acknowledged as his masters was in his manner and voice, not in any use of formal address. "At Luis's coffee house," he said.

"You know where that is?"

"Yes! Luis is a Haitian. His coffee house is on South Street."

Sutton reached for his hat again but Dupont stopped him.

"I think it's another trap," he stated. "Nerva started to warn us of something. They have attacked Violet and myself. This may be an attempt upon you."

"But Kali—"

"It might not be Kali. This gang seems to know the names and facts and much about the expedition where Violet was born. It could be a means of getting you down in the dock section, just a very clever plot to get you where you could not defend yourself. Dacca, you know, doesn't know Kali by sight."

"What do you suggest?"

"Let me go. I am younger and I will be very careful, and if there seems to be something to it I'll take Kali some place where I know it's safe, and send for you." Though he did not mention it Dupont felt that his hypnotic power would enable him to dominate any situation which would arise.

Sutton reflected for a moment. "All right," he agreed. "But you take Dacca along. It will be safer with the two of you."

"Then—then there is no protection for Violet here—"

Sutton smiled. "I've killed big game and roughed it, and not so many years ago. This is daytime and a modern apartment building, and you'll have more to worry about with Dacca and yourself than I will."

Before he left Dupont made another effort to see Violet but could obtain no answer to his knock. For fear of worrying Sutton he said nothing of the disagreement, but hastened off with Dacca.

The coffee house was situated on the back part

of a lot, reached by a narrow covered passageway between a crumbling three-story brick warehouse and a sailors' boarding place. The interior was dingy, with several worn tables and chairs, a long, rickety counter, and a huge ship's galley rigged up beneath a porthole which was cut in the wall and which admitted the only daylight to the room. On the floor was sawdust, rolled and trampled upon until it was indistinguishable from the dirt. The only bright spot in the room was a noisy parrakeet, perched upon a stand near the door.

Luis was a mottled, yellow negro, who greeted Dacca in patois French, with mild cordiality. Dacca led the way to a table, while Luis called through some back entranceway for Kali. Dupont, glancing around, could not shake off a subconscious feeling of impending danger. The soot and grime of the ill-ventilated, low-ceilinged room irritated him. The situation, far back from the street, meant that no call for help could be heard if anything actually should develop. Even the chattering of the bird annoyed him. He was glad, very glad, he had prevented the coming of Sutton.

"Kali is a pygmy," explained Dacca, suddenly.

Dupont nodded without answering. He was not sure it was more than imagination, but it seemed to him that Luis was visiting the few patrons in the place, was whispering to them rather mysteriously. Each in turn rose and left. Of course it could mean nothing.

Kali entered, and for just a moment a sickening thought came to Dupont. Could this be the hunchback whom Violet had described? But Kali was lithe and straight, and save for his stature, an unusually well-formed black. His head, large for the rest of him, had none of the fleshy jowl or porky eyes of her description. In his hand was a coffee pot, a peculiar burden. Placing it on the stove, he joined them.

While acknowledging the greetings of the little man, explaining that he had come in place of the 'witch doctor,' Dupont found it difficult to keep his eyes off Luis. The proprietor closed the front door, fumbling with it. Then he left through the passage which had admitted Kali.

Kali, expressing satisfaction in a mixture of Spanish and native dialect which Dupont could grasp, promised to deliver certain papers which his father had sent. Asking them to wait he hurried out through the rear to get them. Then, too late, Dupont realized the trap. He hurried to the front entrance. Locked! To the back. Bolted!

A strange noise from the parrakeet caught his ear. Turning, he saw the bird topple from its perch, suffocated. He sniffed at the foul air suspiciously and detected a faint, acrid, semifamiliar odor. Poison fumes! Already a lassitude caught at his limbs. His eyes closed in spite of himself. He lurched, suddenly weak, against a table.

Supreme Pictures, Inc. *The Mystery Mind*
A SCENE FROM THE PHOTOPLAY STARRING ROBERT J. PAULINE

XII

THE WOLF

DURING the afternoon Violet's mood wore off. At first she held steadfast to her sense of outraged pride; her feeling that Robert had made no effort to understand or sympathize with her view. But bit by bit she came to grasp her own inconsistency. Only the evening before, resting in his arms, she had eagerly planned with him the hurried marriage on this day so that he could protect her, could be at her side by night as well as during the less dangerous waking hours. While she had been unselfish, had been thinking of him entirely in her decision to postpone the wedding until after the trouble, yet she had announced it too abruptly, too suddenly. After all he had had every reason to hold her close, to demand the right to protect her. Since his return from Philadelphia and his striking success in his demonstration there he had thrown over every other consideration in order to fight for her safety and happiness. Not once but several times he had risked his life for her. And she? She had repaid him with a slap.

At first she started out from her room, to tell him how sorry she was. On second thought she felt that she could not quite do that, at least not all at once and without encouragement. She would show him indirectly that she was repentant. She would make it up to him in other ways.

She bathed her face, removing the signs of her grief; then she pottered at her toilet until it was six, though she hardly thought it four. But as she stole down the steps she was a different Violet, a radiant Violet, a very beautiful one altogether.

In the center of the studio stood the table on which Dacca served their meals, but as yet it was unset. She looked at her watch again, and glanced also at the clock. Uneasy, she went out into the kitchen. There the dog rose up, straining at his leash eagerly, but of the servant there was not the slightest sign.

And where was Robert? And Doctor Daddy? Releasing the dog, for she was a little afraid now, she returned to the studio, calling up to the bedrooms. Doctor Sutton responded, surprised to learn it was so late. Dupont and Dacca had not returned, however, and the scientist became as alarmed as she, in fact wanted to hurry down to the coffee house where they had gone and only gave up the idea because it meant leaving Violet alone.

He phoned the detective agency finally, arranging with them to send two men to investigate. Violet meanwhile busied herself in the preparation

of a supper. She set a third place, looking at it wistfully on every trip in from the kitchen. After everything was ready they waited, nearly two hours, before they ate. While she cleared the table afterward, putting everything to rights, Doctor Sutton phoned the agency again.

Nothing had been learned by the operatives. Luis's coffee house, known to the men, had appeared the same as always. Luis denied seeing Dupont or Dacca, or of ever hearing of a black named Kali. Every effort was being made to locate clues. Another report would be made in the morning.

Doctor Sutton was worn out by the strain of the day and as he sat to keep his ward company he nodded desperately and could hardly keep awake. She insisted that he go to bed, and in the end had her way. Alone, she waited and watched long after midnight. Then the silence began to terrify her. She gave the dog the run of the apartment, fleeing to her room, locking the door.

In bed at last, sleep refused to come to her. She tossed, restlessly, for an interminable period. When she slipped into a half-conscious doze, it was only to be awakened, immediately afterward, by a sudden terrible crash in the studio below or out in the building somewhere.

Plucky, courageous, for all her qualms, she slipped to the floor and into slippers and a wrapper. No warning bark from the dog told of intruders in the apartment, unless he had been quieted.

967368

She stole to the door, opening it slightly in the darkness. There was no sound. Stealing out and down she flashed on the lights, discovering nothing. Finally she was impelled to open the hall door, first with the chain on, then full, as no one seemed to be lurking outside.

Whatever the crash had been there was nothing following of an alarming nature. Down the hall another tenant stood, a rather slim erect young man, also in a dressing gown.

"Hello!" he ventured. "Did you hear something?"

She smiled. "What do you suppose it was?"

"I have no idea." He lighted a pipe and strolled toward her in friendly fashion, leaving his door ajar. "Routed me out of a sound sleep, so"— he grinned —"here I am!"

She felt slightly embarrassed, since both were in deshabille, but somehow the sound of a friendly voice was welcome and some such motive seemed to have actuated him.

"You have taken Miss Nerva's apartment?" he suggested, making no mention of the tragedy, perhaps unaware of the events of the night before.

She nodded.

"I've the next studio," he told her. "I'm an artist. Been here since they built the place. Paul Noyes is my name."

"I'm pleased to meet you," she said. Then as he extended a hand, apparently expecting her to

introduce herself, she detected a subtle something about him which frightened her and she fled. A moment later she laughed at her own timorousness.

Now sleep came to her easily. Perhaps the friendliness of the stranger dissipated to some extent the tension under which she labored, or possibly it was a matter of sheer exhaustion. The next thing she knew was the sudden placing of a firm masculine hand upon her shoulder, waking her with a start.

"Robert!" she exclaimed, giving voice to the first thought.

At the same instant she remembered that she had locked her door firmly upon the inside; that there was absolutely no other mode of access to her room; and that Dupont, if he could, would not intrude in such a manner as this, would not begin to presume in this way.

The hand lightened. Another hand swept the bed covering from her. She felt herself being dragged out upon the floor.

"Come Cutie," was the cautious whisper in the darkness. "Come along nicely, 'cause there's no time to waste!"

Carl Canfield! Her scream was cut short by his hand over her mouth. With no protection but the sheer folds of her nightgown she felt herself drawn to him ruthlessly. Though she struggled, every hope within her froze. She was in the grasp of the wolf, helpless.

XIII

DISAPPEARING DEAD

ONLY the sheltering cover of the darkness gave Violet the slightest encouragement. She knew that if she succeeded for a single moment in eluding her assailant, or even if she managed just to break the clasp of his hand over her mouth, she would be able to rush to the door or to summon help with a scream. But Canfield's steel-hard muscles pressed into the flesh of her waist, crushing her against his rough clothing. Her lips were lacerated cruelly against her teeth as she strove to twist her head out of his grasp.

Suddenly a new sound caught her ear, an excited scratching against the door. The dog! As if sensing her situation, realizing her peril, he began to bark loudly and furiously. That meant that Sutton would be aroused and that others in the building might be awakened, to help in the capture of the gangster. If only Dupont were there! Or Dacca!

Carl Canfield understood his danger. Evidently he had not been aware of the presence of the animal, otherwise he would have protected himself

against this possibility. In a brief uncertain instant his hold upon Violet loosened, unconsciously. She took advantage of the opening it gave her, quickly, without hesitation, wrenching from his grasp and running to the door. There to her amazement the heavy bolt of the lock was in place. Even as she fumbled at the key desperately she caught herself wondering how he had gained access to the room.

In a moment he was upon her again. The extreme darkness was to her advantage as he tried to pull her away from the lock; the furious clawing upon the other side of the thin panel served to disconcert him. Just as his fingers found her wrist she turned the key. As he jerked that hand back and toward him she managed to turn the knob with the other, allowing the door to swing inward about an inch against her foot. At the same moment the dog dashed against the wood with a wolfish snarl, the weight of the animal nearly pushing her back into his arms.

Instantly, though, Canfield grasped the greater menace. Abandoning all attempts to capture Violet he leaned against the door in a frantic effort to close it. At the same moment the animal leaped again. The man possessed the greater weight. He swore, half frightened, half angry, as some obstruction defeated his purpose. Then, rising above everything else, there came the shrill, piercing howl of the dog, whose paw was caught

in the jam. In the night the cry held all the harrowing, echoing defiance of some wild beast at bay.

Violet shuddered. In vain she attempted to spur herself to action, to make some move to help her four-footed protector. Canfield, however, was unnerved completely. In less than an instant, quicker than coherent thought, the dog pulled his foot, crushed, from its vise, and leaped again against the door. Canfield hardly raised a hand in his own defense. The man who knew no fear against an unprotected girl was utterly yellow in his battle with the brute. The infuriated beast reared once, and threw him. In the darkness the wolf-like snarls of the police hound grew more muffled and quick, then ended in a sickening crunch of bone beneath flesh, mixed with the death gurgle of the man-wolf, the last breath of one unscrupulous tool of Phantom Face and his gang.

In the hall outside the lights sprang up suddenly, and she heard the voice of Doctor Sutton. Now that the ordeal was over she felt herself sinking against the wall. Her answer was very faint. He rushed in, armed with his huge revolver, bought for use against big game. When his hand found the switch, flooding the room with light, she averted her head in horror.

"What happened?" Dropping to her side he sought to comfort her. "How did it happen? Tell Doctor Daddy!" Once again she was the little, wee bit of humanity intrusted to his care,

fatherless and motherless. He gathered her in his arms, trembling as he thought of her danger.

The dog, nosing the prone, lifeless figure of the intruder, as if to be sure his work was well done, came over and poked a cool snout into her hand. At first she drew away. Then with a sudden warm burst of gratitude she threw both arms about the beast and found relief in tears.

Doctor Sutton slipped her wrapper over her shoulders, helping her to her feet. Insisting she spend the rest of the night in his room, away from the dead man and the scene of the killing, he led her into the hall. Below in the studio was the light of dawn, flooding the space through the long, unshaded windows. Everything was quiet now and there was little to remind her of the terrible ordeal through which she had passed.

At this instant the bell rang, loudly and insistently.

Doctor Sutton hesitated. Finally, as the bell rang again, impatiently, he told Violet to wait up on the balcony. With his revolver in hand he first stopped in her room to examine the figure of the dead man to make certain there were no signs of life; that nothing could be done. Then he hurried down.

At the door, conscious, but weak and unable to talk, was Dacca. Supporting him was a rough, good-natured character, evidently a truck driver, from his cap and gloves.

"Here's your cook," explained the latter, in not unkind, but rather matter-of-fact fashion. "He got gassed and a fellow gimme twenty bones to trot him to a Doc and bring him to and bring him home. The Doc"—a sympathetic side glance at Dacca—"the Doc had quite a time, and he ain't quite right yet, but I hadda get to work or I'd looked after him a little longer."

Violet rushed down. The three helped Dacca to his room. There he made fruitless efforts to speak to them.

"The Doc says he'll talk in a few hours more and—and by night will be able to fight a couple of rounds, maybe."

"What happened? Tell us what happened!" Violet, her immediate concern for the black removed, was impatient for news of her fiancé. She began to tremble as she realized it was nearly twenty-four hours since she had seen him. "Where is Rob—Mr. Dupont?" she corrected.

"The guy? Oh, I forgot!" The driver fished in the pocket of a dirty khaki shirt. "He said, 'Send this note quick,' but—but I had my hands full with your smoke. Thought he never was going to come to."

Feverishly Violet opened the paper, folded with corners in, something like an envelope, and addressed to Doctor Sutton—a fact she disregarded.

I'm all right. On a hot trail. Guard Violet and don't worry.

ROBERT.

Handing it to her guardian, stamping a tiny, bare foot, in her vexation at its lack of definite news, she turned away. Doctor Sutton stopped to give another yellow-back to the truckman for his trouble, then escorted him to the door. Together they mounted to the balcony.

The dog, after keeping closely by his mistress, as if determined to be in a better position to protect her next time, left them to investigate his victim as they reached the top of the stairs. An instant later they heard a foolish little yelp, as if the animal was puzzled. Doctor Sutton rushed into the room. Violet followed. The lights were still on full. Circling around and around the little chamber the hound looked at them helplessly. Violet, with sinking heart, exchanged glances with Doctor Sutton. The body of the dead man had disappeared.

Though the scientist made an immediate search there was not the slightest trace of the corpse. There were two entrances to the apartment, and two only. The front door led into the studio proper. Here they had admitted Dacca. From Dacca's room, where they had taken the stricken black, not only was the main entrance in sight but also the bottom of the stairs from the balcony where the dead man lay. The back door was only to be reached through Dacca's quarters, or from the kitchen adjoining, in constant view from his room. It was impossible for a living man to

have escaped and Sutton had assured himself of the fact of the man's death.

Violet remembered suddenly that the door had been locked; that Canfield apparently had gained admittance in some other fashion. She hurried to the windows. The shades were in place, the sash fastened. Outside, a sheer wall dropped ten stories to the street. She looked in the little bath. There he might have hidden, alive. But a corpse—

XIV

A MIDNIGHT TRAIL

DUPONT slipped a hand into his pocket and produced a quarter, the last bit of currency remaining in his possession.

"Here, boy," he grinned, flipping it to the youngster, "this is for you."

The urchin smirked his gratitude, scampering out of the gloom of the areaway, silhouetted for a moment against the lone arc across the street before he disappeared. Dupont ripped the paper from the package the boy had brought him, eating ravenously two hamburger sandwiches freely supplied with onions and finishing with a rather dry and slender piece of apple pie. Then he smiled again as he settled in the uncomfortable, but hospitable, corner of the brickwork.

Eight long, interminable hours, had elapsed since his narrow escape from death in the dingy coffee house upon South Street. At first the terrible nausea from the asphyxiating fumes had clung to him, hindering his thoughts and movements but making the passage of time less obvious and dreary. Now he was in full possession of his

faculties. Poor Dacca, however, had not fared so well.

The death of the parrakeet, together with a strange, faint, almost sweet odor in the air, had warned Dupont. Though his eyes were closed, though a lassitude caught at his limbs so that he lurched against a table, he had yet managed to keep his presence of mind. Hurriedly taking a handkerchief from his pocket he had clasped it to his nose, a mildly effective emergency mask. Rushing to Dacca he had shaken him vigorously, but the black already had succumbed. The Dominican's birth and upbringing in tropical wilds had given him a keener sense of smell, had rendered his membranes more susceptible to the gas.

Dupont then had turned to a quick survey of the ill-lighted premises, seeking a way of escape before he, too, should be overpowered. On the stove stood the coffee pot, boiling away, with its tin top rattling in aggravating fashion. It was this pot which the pygmy had brought in and placed upon the fire, which unquestionably was producing the poisonous vapor. Hastily Dupont had attempted to lift it from the stove. Its handle had been unexpectedly hot. He had dropped it, spreading the mixture over the fire so that a sudden new sizzling, visible production of gas, had enveloped him, had nearly overpowered him in spite of the handkerchief and his caution in breathing.

Only by the sheer exercise of will had he forced his limbs to carry him, his arms to move at his bidding. Growing more and more feeble every instant he had staggered to the door, attempting to throw his weight against it. As the task seemingly became more and more hopeless, he had spied on the wall a fire-ax. He had battered down the door, had gasped at outside air gloriously fresh for all the reek of the river held by a low-lying fog.

Then he had plunged in for his man, had half carried, half dragged the unconscious black to the street. There he had hailed a passing truck, had helped hoist Dacca up and on to a pile of burlap, had clambered into the seat, and had directed the driver away from the neighborhood of this attempt upon their lives without any evidence that their escape as yet had been discovered.

Some distance away he had arranged with the truckman to care for Dacca, bribing him with a twenty-dollar bill, giving him most of the other money in his possession for any necessary medical attention. He had scribbled a hasty note for Doctor Sutton. After that he had hurried back to a spot near the coffee house, determined to follow Kali, sure that Kali would be a clue to the haunts and headquarters of the gang. This was an opportunity to strike at his enemies directly, a chance he would not have dared to miss.

But the hours had passed with nothing further

developing. He had been unable to leave his post of observation. He had had nothing to eat or drink, no chance to rest or to attempt to get into touch with Doctor Sutton or Violet. Not until long after dark had he caught his first sight of the pygmy.

Kali, at the start, had led him on a fruitless chase, bringing them back to the coffee house. Then the little man had taken a roundabout route to the spot where Dupont now watched, without question the headquarters of the gang.

First Kali had entered, the door clicking shut behind him so that Dupont could follow no farther. Then Dupont had recognized Renard, arriving some time later; he had detected something familiar about a third man who hurried up and in perhaps half an hour afterward.

The meeting place was an abandoned outbuilding with its entrance on a narrow sloping passageway between a huge commercial structure on one side and on the other the remodeled three-story frame house, of which the shed had once been a connected part. Dupont's post of observation was a cramped angle in the brick wall of the large building behind him. Here he had spent two hours in keen discomfort. From the niche he had ventured forth once to select and call a ragged newsboy, dispatching him for water on one trip, for food on a second, chancing discovery by the gangsters because he felt it physic-

ally impossible, after his experience with the gas, to go on further without drink or nourishment. Now, however, he knew he was a match for all of the gang of Phantom Face. He clasped the revolver in his pocket. He shut his teeth with a snap as he pictured Violet, remembered all she had suffered at their hands.

But the minutes dragged, became fives, and quarter hours, and there was little to break the stillness of the section. Near by were no tenements with their summer noise, no adjacent elevated or street car line with its occasional welcome rumble or rattle or clang of bell. A moon, near its full, appeared over the roof of a towering warehouse in the block behind, slowly transited a bit of very blue sky, and disappeared above the building at his elbow. Was it an all-night vigil?

Suddenly the door opened. It was sheltered from the moonlight now, but the man who emerged, from his stature, was Kali without question. His manner was very furtive. Dupont, preparing to shadow him again, noticed that he held the door behind him, to prevent its slam. The alert ear of the watcher caught no click of the catch. All at once it occurred to him that if the door had not latched he could steal in, perhaps could learn much of value to him, or at least could bag bigger game than the pygmy, because Renard, one of the principal members of the gang, had entered before his eyes.

The door swung in at his touch, silently. He found himself in a hall, dark, carpeted to muffle footsteps. He stole toward a square of light before him, using the caution learned in his hunts for tropical game. Finally he found himself looking in upon a room which might have been the parlor in any one of a million small American homes. At its farther side a double door led to another room, which was dark. In that archway hung old-fashioned beaded curtains. On the floor beneath and around the rug was straw matting, faded, mute testimony of the age of the furnishings.

From beyond, very abruptly, came voices.

"Yes, Phantom Face has failed."

"Because the girl still lives?"

"Yes, because the girl still lives."

"Because the man escaped?"

"Yes, because the man escaped."

For an interminable time there was silence. Yet there was the vibrant sense of life about the premises, malignant, evil life, threatening, menacing, dangerous life. Finally the voices came again.

"Phantom Face was not the head?"

"No, his was the guiding hand."

"A new leader comes?"

"To-night! Soon!" Suddenly the answering voice rose in a crescendo of hate, of passion. "Who are these who venture to defy the will of our Devil God? Shall our worship, older than

this continent, older than the world, older than the stars, be baffled by an old man and his ward, by her lover, by the will of a dead man and the secret of a portrait, by servants, or paid detectives, or the police? There is no God but the Devil God! Phantom Face has failed but there comes to lead us one greater than he! We shall see the power of the hierarchies of hell!"

Dupont clutched his pistol, nervously alert. In spite of himself, in spite of scientific schooling and his own familiar knowledge of the many strange cults of the American tropical negroes, cold chills traveled up and down his spine. He flattened himself against the wall of the hall, watching the room and waiting.

With a rustle a man entered through the curtains from the farther chamber, taking a chair and lighting a cigarette. In a moment he was joined by Renard. Had it been their voices he heard? Were there others in the shack? Unwilling to venture too much, Dupont hesitated. He recognized the first man, after some reflection as the supposed French inventor of the hypnotic machine in Nerva's ill-fated séance. These were accomplished villains, both. In repose their faces showed him, as the trained analyst, the lines of intelligence and cleverness of a high order, together with the indications of cruelty and moral perversion. Could he capture them he would nip the cream of the talent of the gang.

No sign or sound told him of the presence of anyone else. Raising his weapon he marched in upon them boldly.

"You are under arrest! Up with your hands!"

Renard, surprised, recovered quickly. "Arrest? Are you a police officer? Have you a warrant?"

"I am a citizen and as such have the power, in fact it is my duty under the law, to arrest anyone guilty of a crime of which I am an eyewitness."

"And what crime, please?" Renard's tone was ironical.

"The attempted murder of Miss Bronson, the killing of Nerva, the hypnotist."

The two men exchanged glances. Neither showed fear or concern, a fact which worried Dupont. Even while Renard questioned him they started to separate, so that he could not cover both. While he waved his weapon to indicate that they were to stand together, before he could give voice to his instructions, there was a diversion at the door to the alley.

Dupont half turned. There was Kali, an expression of amazement on his face. In the moment Dupont took his eyes off Renard that gangster deftly and quickly slipped behind him, so that he was trapped.

"Now up with your hands!" snarled the fox.

Instead, Dupont continued to cover the Frenchman. "You can get me," he muttered, "but at the price of one of you. The moment you shoot I shoot."

"Disarm him, Kali!" directed Renard, coolly.

To Dupont came a sudden inspiration. As the pygmy stole up he caught and fastened his eyes. He still kept his weapon trained upon the Frenchman, who continued to hold his arms above him, but he bent the whole of his hypnotic power upon the unsuspecting black.

"Kill Renard, Kali! Kill Renard!" Over and over in mind he projected the command. Outwardly it seemed as if he waited, as if he was making no particular fight for his life.

All at once, with the bloodcurdling cry of the head hunters of the Orinoco, Kali spun about and sprang upon Renard. Instantly the fox had his hands full. Dupont, grinning, kept the Frenchman covered until he had backed out the door. Then he turned and ran out into the alley, to the street, up and about several blocks, to throw off possible pursuit. In an all-night drug store he stopped for breath. He knew Kali would come from under the spell the moment he left. It was extremely unlikely that the pygmy would succeed in killing Renard, even harming him. Dupont's work yet lay ahead of him. He must get help to raid the place. First he would send a reassuring note to Violet and Doctor Sutton.

XV

NEIGHBORS

THE amazing Dacca had breakfast prepared at about the usual time, and, except for a little weakness or hesitancy in his movements, he seemed much the same as always. Violet, scorning the bed of her guardian, had tossed about on the couch in Doctor Sutton's room, unhappy, ill at ease, too nervous for coherent thought. But when Dacca stood before her with his tray, with toast buttered thin and hot, just as she liked it, with the aroma of the coffee bearing witness to the peculiar pungency which he alone could get, she straightened with a little exclamation of delight, drawing her robe about her and smiling at him gratefully.

He brought up a little table, opening her eggs and arranging everything with meticulous care, as though she were a princess, or a child. She ate everything before her. Then with a little sigh she stretched herself, and, after a reflective longing glance at the big old-fashioned bed in the corner by the window. ran over, slipped from the wrapper,

rolled over beneath the covers, and in half a moment was asleep.

Doctor Sutton came in after a while and looked at her and smiled. Dacca removed the breakfast dishes noiselessly. The sun shifted from the carpet in the middle of the room to a potted plant in the window. Then she awoke, fresh, full of the thought she would soon see Robert, that he perhaps would have forgotten her foolishness, that in his arms, clasped closely to him, she would again listen to his plans for their happiness, prepared to give them the seal of her approval.

She braved the memory of the horror in her own chamber to don her clothes, arranging her hair with very particular attention, selecting one of her most summery dresses. From the balcony she could see Doctor Sutton seated at the table in the studio, reading. She stole down to surprise him, and giggled as he jumped, at her touch. Then she noticed the circles under his eyes, the new lines of worry which six days of the terror had carved deeply and permanently in the flesh of his cheeks and lower face. She flung both arms about his neck in warm impulse of sympathy and understanding; she noticed that his hands trembled as he put them over hers; she could not avoid a little trace of dampness in her own eyes.

He disengaged himself after just a moment.

"Here's a new message from Robert," he explained.

She took the slip from him. eagerly, flushing a bit.

Have a hot lead and cannot drop it now. Expect to round up most of the gang by night.

ROBERT.

Slipping it into her dress, and holding it there as if it were a little bit of him, she was silent, her glance soft, the fresh color still in her cheeks.

Doctor Sutton rose. "I think it will be safe for me to leave you for a while," he said. "Dacca is here and I will be back before dark, and—and there are a number of things I have been neglecting—"

She urged him to go. They had lunch together but after the meal she rushed to get his hat and cane for him, then she made a minute inspection of his attire, straightened his tie, replacing his stick pin, brushing a few infinitesimal pieces of lint from the collar of his coat. At the door he hesitated. Finally he went up to his room, returning with an army pistol, which he handed to her.

"It is loaded, Violet," he cautioned. "This is the safety catch, so! Don't forget that. And if you do discharge it hold it away from you; don't let anyone get too close to you. And remember three things. Squeeze, don't jerk the trigger. Don't be afraid of the kick, and hold your muscles tense, but not stiff. Aim low, as it kicks up a bit. Understand?"

She repeated the instructions. Then she accompanied him to the door, watching him down the hall. When she closed the door she put the chain on. The heavy revolver she took and placed, very gingerly, beneath a large magazine on the table.

Several times during the early afternoon Dacca came in from the kitchen, to see if she was all right. The black man evidently sensed the imminency of danger. At first Violet thought she too detected some sort of warning intuition, but she fought it off. She became absorbed in a novel she had started more than a week before, when the menace of the band of Phantom Face was a thing unthought of.

At about three the telephone rang. She answered. There was no one at the other end, nor could she obtain any response to her signal for central. A little later it rang again. This time she heard somebody, a man, who wished to talk to Doctor Sutton, but who could not hear her. Again she had to hang up in despair.

Perhaps half an hour later there was a ring at the door. Dacca answered, Violet sitting with her hand on the pistol beneath its magazine. A gum-chewing youth was revealed with a lineman's telephone set in one hand, a battered case of tools in the other.

"Phone trouble?" he remarked, interrogatively.

"It rang," Violet explained, leaving her table

and weapon and going to the side of the others. "I couldn't hear anyone, or they couldn't hear me, and I couldn't get central."

The repair man, little more than a boy, threw down his tools and started after his task in businesslike fashion. Dacca returned to the kitchen, Violet to her book.

But something about the other in the room distressed Violet; some vague sense of familiarity struck her, and it was somehow unaccountable. She took to watching the youth and noticed first a certain grace of movement, a certain panther-like lithesomeness which puzzled her.

"What an effeminate boy," she thought to herself.

Then she took to wondering if it could not be a girl disguised as a man, impossible as it should be for one to obtain the position under such circumstances. But if it were a girl certain suggested roundnesses of figure would be accounted for. A cap, pulled down well over the mechanic's head, might well conceal a wealth of hair.

While Violet pursued her reflections she failed to watch the other closely. All at once she realized that the supposed telephone repairman stood immediately beneath the portrait of Steele. The boy had maneuvered around to that part of the room very carefully. Now he rose, a sharp knife glittering in his hand. He raised an arm, quickly and yet cautiously, to slit the canvas

from its frame. There was no mistaking his intention.

But before she could rise or cry out Dacca had dashed from the kitchen. He had been watching, unknown to Violet. The repairman, confused, brought the knife down across the picture, making a deep gash clear through the canvas, nearly ruining the face. Dropping the knife, abandoning the tools and testing outfit, he tried to run toward the door but found Dacca blocking the way. Without hesitation he turned, dashing up the stairs to the balcony.

Dacca gave chase, anger conquering his weakness. Violet followed with the big army pistol. The repairman darted into Violet's room, bolting the door behind him. From the other side they heard the sound of a window thrown open. Dacca hesitated only long enough to exchange glances with Violet, then he put his shoulder to the door, rushing again and again until it gave. Together they hurried in to find no signs of the intruder. One window swung open. She leaned out carefully, clinging with both hands, made dizzy by the height. Ten stories below was the sidewalk, but no crushed figure of a boy. On the side of the building was no ledge or protruding stone or iron ornamentation to afford either foot or hand hold. In the room and bath was no hiding place. The disappearance was more baffling than the theft of the body of Canfield the night before.

Puzzled, completely upset, only realizing that she ought to do something and not knowing what, Violet returned to the studio, drew back the chain on the door, and rushed out into the hall. Of course the lineman could not have escaped this way, yet there was no other way—

Standing in front of his studio was her neighbor, Paul Noyes, the slim young artist she had met the evening before.

"Hello," he exclaimed, noting her excited manner, "what's up?"

"Did you—did you see a telephone repairman go out this way? It—it was just a young boy!"

"Why no!" He knocked the ashes from his pipe. There seemed a note of genuine sympathy in his tone. "Anything wrong?"

"How—how long have you been here, out in the hall I mean?"

"Uh—a pipeful! That's—that's about ten minutes. My model's getting into her rig, and"—deprecatingly —"a screen's not good enough for her. Says she likes me out in the hall!" He laughed.

Suddenly Violet was reminded of the damage to the picture. She knew how her guardian would feel. Doctor Sutton had said he would risk his life to preserve it. This Paul Noyes was an artist. Perhaps the damage was reparable. It was a wild idea, but at least she would know—

"Could you"—she half approached him, im-

pulsively—"could you come in and—and look at something for a moment?"

"Why, surely!"

She led him to the picture, pointing to the slit. Then she stood back, anxiously, as he examined it, telling him what had happened.

"That's easy to fix," he announced, after a moment. "The edges of the canvas are drawn together—I've a sort of machine to do it, myself, and you can't tell it when it's done. The cut is in the solid color, too, which makes it easy to touch up."

She became very eager. "How long does it take? Are—are there people who do things like that—"

"I'll do it for you!" He looked at his watch. "I'll be glad to help you out. If you've some one to help me carry it into my studio—?"

"You—you couldn't do it here?"

"That wouldn't be as easy. I'd have to lug in an awful lot of paraphernalia; besides, I take it there's some one from whom you wish to keep the accident if you can."

"Well"—she surrendered slowly—"I oughtn't to leave. I don't think I should go to your studio alone."

He laughed. He noticed that Dacca was watching them. "Bring your man," he suggested. "He seems husky enough to protect you. I'll need him to carry the picture anyhow."

The other studio, as the three entered, was revealed to Violet as the home of an artist. Everywhere were pictures and sketches and trophies and bits of art work. Immediately upon their entry there was a scurrying which Violet understood as she saw the model.

The girl, a slim, slender, trim little thing, had a mop of black bobbed hair which she tossed rather defiantly. Covering her were only her thin gauze draperies, so that Violet, embarrassed to some extent, did not glance at her closely.

Instead she assisted Noyes and Dacca as they arranged the damaged picture upon a frame, tilting it back preparatory to the repair work.

Before many moments, however, the canvas upon which Noyes had been engaged attracted the attention of Violet. She saw that it represented a woodland scene. Presumably some sort of airy creature was to be painted in, accounting for the scanty attire of the girl on the model's stand. She glanced toward her a second time and as she did so caught a look which possessed so much of malignant hate that it held her numb, startling her. It was so unexpected that she stood rooted to the spot.

At that moment there was a knock at the door. In response to Noyes' "Come in!" a little hunchback entered. Although he was jauntily attired, although he walked with an air of almost radiant amiability, there was no mistaking his little eyes

in their piggish sockets, nor his involuntary wink as he saw and recognized Violet.

"Another of my models," explained Noyes from across the studio.

Violet was too horrified to respond, too frightened to speak. She attempted to flash a warning look at Dacca but found that her faculties had left her. Fascinated she saw the little man approach the black carelessly, then with a sudden and very remarkable swing, too quick and unexpected to be dodged, floor him with a heavy, vicious blow from a blackjack.

As Dacca's body struck the floor she woke to action and fled. The way to the door was blocked. She darted behind a screen. Here she made an amazing discovery which drove her own danger from her mind, which held her cold for the fraction of a second. Neatly laid out upon a chair were the clothes of the telephone repairman. There was the cap; on the floor stood the heavy shoes. On top of the boy's greasy shirt and suit lay unmistakably feminine undergarments. After all it had been a girl! In some manner she had escaped to the studio of Noyes.

And then in a flash Violet understood. The model! Trapped, the girl had stripped off her clothes and taken her place on the stand in case a search of this studio was made. Furthermore —

Violet glanced around the screen. Noyes was coming toward her, leisurely, amused. But she

had eyes only for the other girl. Yes, the short black hair was a wig. The features were unmistakable. In her consciousness there formed the shadowy head and the dim beady eyes of the snake. Again she was in the hands of the emissaries of Phantom Face. The girl on the model's stand was Vera Collins, the very cleverest of her enemies.

XVI

HYDRA-HEAD

DUPONT halted his squad of police about a block from the meeting place.

"I don't think they've had any opportunity to get away," he explained. "I doubt they expect me back this quick; rather, they'll imagine I'll come after daybreak."

"Is it the little shack back in the alley there?" The sergeant pointed. "In that narrow passageway, where the arc shines in?"

Dupont nodded. "Do you know it?"

"I'll say! We caught a gang there once, making the queer."

"Are there any back entrances or secret exits to watch?"

"Nary a one. We got the counterfeiters like nickels in a slot."

"Are we ready then?" Dupont was nervously anxious.

"Let's go!"

With Dupont there were five all told. Like shadows in the gloom of the dingy street, ghostly passers-by in the silence just preceding dawn,

they hurried along the walk, and with drawn weapons filed into the cramped space of the areaway.

From the little frame building there were no signs of life at first. Then one of the men detected a momentary gleam of light behind the shade in the single front window and he whispered his discovery eagerly to the others. Overhead and beyond towered the big office structures, throwing this pocket of the block into deep, impenetrable shadow. The illumination from the arc at the street only struck in half way, accentuating the darkness.

Dupont tried the door, softly. It was locked. The sergeant selected his two most husky men and before their onslaught the frail panels bent, then snapped with a loud report as the door crashed in. Still nothing happened. There were no cries, no sudden upspringing of light, no indications of alarm or of a disposition to contest this invasion.

Yet Dupont was sure the men he sought were somewhere in these quarters. Subconsciously, perhaps, he sensed their presence. The deep stillness irritated him, whipping up his impatience, spurring him to action. Grasping his automatic more firmly he jumped up into the little hallway, leading the others toward the square of light, which was much the same as upon his visit of an hour before.

In the low-ceilinged sitting room everything was in place, dovetailing with the picture in his memory. But though the men were not to be seen there were disclosed upon the floor a number of traveling bags and suitcases, a trunk, and a great variety of cardboard and wooden boxes. Dupont had been right in one surmise. The gang had decided to leave the moment he escaped. They were all packed up. Perhaps the men themselves were away, to avoid capture or to obtain some sort of conveyance for the baggage.

Rather curious, the policemen crowded into the room with Dupont. The sergeant lifted one of the bags, finding it remarkably heavy. Then he tried to open it, but discovered it was locked. As he took a heavy screw-driver knife from his pocket to force the catch, the others clustered around. Dupont, far from at ease, more alert than the policemen, dropped his eyes for just a moment to a cardboard hat box, prodding at it with his weapon. It was equally heavy. He started to pry off the cover.

At that instant a warning bustle came from several directions. A voice, quick, sharp, accustomed to obedience, rang out:

"Up with your hands! Up! Up!"

Trapped! Dupont raised his arms, continuing to clasp his weapon. The sergeant and the three patrolmen followed suit.

"No monkey business, now!"

Renard stepped into the room, master of the situation. At the ringing quality in the tone of the commands Dupont recognized his voice as the mysterious one he had heard giving utterance to the mystic threats of the Devil God. Renard, he grasped, was one of the gang particularly to be feared. Was the fox, under the very clever guise of charlatanism and superstition, the actual head?

Surrounding the raiding party were five members of the band in addition to Renard. Covering the sergeant from the hallway which had admitted them was the Frenchman Dupree, Renard's companion at the time of Dupont's previous visit. From the curtains of the farther room three men covered the three police officers. Boggs, the chauffeur, and Luis, the keeper of the coffee house, Dupont recognized instantly. The third man, after some little mental effort, he placed as the attendant or valet to Dupree at the time the Frenchman brought the hypnotic machine to Nerva's apartment for her séance. As for himself, Dupont was covered by the pygmy, Kali. In the black's hand was a little winged dart. Dupont knew it from his travels, knew the speed with which the poison on the point acted. In the hands of Kali it was more deadly than a firearm.

The sergeant was the one to break the spell, to precipitate the fight. Just as Renard was about to direct the disarming of the forces of the law the grizzled policeman jerked out something in low

tones, to his men, then with his revolver still held up in the air fired at the single lamp, putting it out. It was a remarkable piece of marksmanship, enough to break the wrist of a strong man.

Immediately the shots spit out in the darkness. The police dropped to the floor in accordance with their special training, firing so as to afford the least effective target to the gangsters. Dupont, changing his position after each shot, aimed at the flashes from the farther side of the room, meanwhile working his way around to his own forces and the door, to block the escape of any of the others.

One man, crawling, bumped against his legs. Dupont's weapon barked just a moment before the flash from the floor. The aim of the other, fortunately disconcerted, grazed the sleeve of his coat, but did not touch him. A groan told of his own better marksmanship in the dark.

The battle was over as quickly as it started. The sergeant waited, cautiously, for several moments after the last shot. Then he struck a match. One of his men flashed an electric torch about. The lamp, an old-fashioned oil burner, was relighted, and the casualties revealed before them.

The victim of Dupont's shot was the man whose name he did not know, whom he had seen once before as the accomplice of Dupree, the Frenchman. Renard and Dupree and Kali had escaped. Luis, the proprietor of the coffee house, was a prisoner. Attempting to clamber out the window

he had been nabbed and held by one of the policemen. Boggs, the chauffeur, lay crumpled up, dead, from a clean shot through the lungs.

Two of the officers immediately were sent out to intercept any of those who had eluded them, but they returned, unable to find any sign of the fugitives. Dupont and the sergeant searched the shack carefully. No one was in hiding.

"Well—!" The sergeant philosophically resumed his attempt to open the bag. "Sure," he remarked, "evidence is sometimes as good as a man because it talks, and a man won't, always."

Dupont hurried to break into the cardboard box he had started to open before. One by one the contents of every bag and box were exposed to view. Even the trunk was forced. Before them, neatly piled and in perfect order, were bricks; red bricks, yellow bricks, mottled fancy bricks, and ordinary bricks. Nothing else.

Dupont flushed. "It was a trap. We walked right into it. They knew our curiosity would be aroused by a lot of heavy things to open; that it would give them an opportunity to catch us off our guard."

The sergeant's eyes traveled slowly to their prisoner. "We'll learn something," he muttered. "Come here, tabasco!"

The negro's eyes widened with fear. He knew he was to be subjected to the third degree, that what he knew would be forced from him. At the

same time he knew the price of treachery to the gang. Great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead. He trembled, so that he had to be held up by two officers.

"Know what's coming, don't you?" A sort of cruel exultation was in the sergeant's expression. He did not relish the episode of the bricks. When word of the loaded bags and boxes went the rounds of the precinct and city police circles, he knew he faced chaffing which might never end. "Well!" He slapped the man's face, suddenly. "What do you know?"

For all his fear the negro possessed courage. Gritting his teeth he refused a word of any sort.

"Come on! Come on, there! Tell us where else the gang hangs out. Tell us all about who's associated with the precious outfit."

Still Luis was stubborn. Angered, the sergeant shouted his orders. The two men holding the negro seized his arms, bending them backward and upward. His face twitched in agony. His breath came in short, fearful gasps. He began to moan as the leverage on his arms started to twist the joints from their sockets at his shoulders.

Dupont felt his blood run cold. Though he remembered all Violet had suffered at the hands of the gang he could not stand still, a silent witness to this torture. But before he could make a move to stop the police, Luis surrendered.

"I'll tell," he whispered. "I—I'll tell!"

The sergeant straightened, with a look of satisfaction. "Where—"

He got no further. There was a quick, high-pitched, whizzing sound, coming apparently from the direction of the window. Luis half jumped up at his place, then he went backward, as though some invisible archer was using his spine for a bow. No sound passed his lips. For a brief moment he was taut, then something snapped, and he dropped to the floor, dead. Protruding from the back of his neck was a small, feathered, poisoned dart. On his lips was a tiny fleck of foam.

"Kali!" Dupont shouted.

He leaped to the window, drawing his revolver. One officer followed him, another dashed to the passageway. No sign of the pygmy was found. In the brief instant of Luis's death struggle he had escaped a second time.

Thoroughly disgruntled the sergeant led his small force out of the shack. The three dead were laid in a corner, to await the medical examiner. One officer was posted at the door on guard.

Dupont was dissatisfied. It seemed to him that some secret of the little house had escaped them. He could not shake off the impression of the presence yet of some of the gang, an intuitive feeling strengthened now by the fact of Kali's return, the ease with which the pygmy had slain

the would-be traitor, the mysterious manner in which he had disappeared again.

He borrowed the flashlight belonging to the officer left on guard and re-entered to make a new and careful and more painstaking search of the premises. Dawn had broken, giving him the aid of the rising daylight. He overlooked nothing, tapping floors and walls, investigating every little detail of the rooms and corridors.

Last was the windowless room behind the living room, beyond the beaded curtains associated closely in his mind with his first visit to the place. From this alcove had come the mysterious voices. Triumphantly he noted that the farther wall sounded hollow to his knuckles. Elatedly he found the hidden door, breaking it open when he failed to locate the spring. With the flash before him he invaded an ill-smelling, cramped chamber, just large enough to contain an iron bed. By the foot of the bed was another door, standing open, a low, narrow door, leading to descending stairs. From below there rose the damp, musty smell of an underground passageway. This was the explanation of the escape of Renard, and Dupree, and Kali.

While he wondered whether to follow his discoveries alone or call the officer something impelled his attention to the bed. There lay a figure, covered with a filthy, ragged blanket, one hand and arm protruding. He felt of the hand,

gingerly. Quickly dropping it, he turned, looking for a light of some sort. On a shelf stood two candles, which he lighted. Then he turned to the figure again. The man was dead. He could not mistake the cold clamminess of the flesh. He wondered who it was, whether a member of the gang or a victim.

With distinct repugnance he pulled back the blanket. Then he staggered against the wall in horror. The dead man was Phantom Face, as fearful an object in death as in life.

For a long while Dupont stood still, gazing at the corpse spellbound. In the light of the candles the mysterious iridescent sheen of the features was as evident as when the man had lived, as when Dupont had seen him alive in the abandoned chemical works. Now eyes and nose and mouth were plainly evident—this was the illusion of it—and now there was nothing. It was indeed a phantom face.

Finally the scientist and investigator in Dupont brought him to the man's side. He reached out with delicate, sensitive fingers to touch the man's features, and as he did so he understood. It was a mask! In shape it was a round oval bulb. In substance it was something like opalescent glass. Rounding over his face it revealed and concealed the features alternately, but never clearly.

Was it an artificial or a natural mask? As near as his fingers could tell him it was part of

the head, it grew from the forehead and cheeks and from below the jaw as a cocoon spun by some invisible psychic chrysalis. In his studies Dupont had heard of strange pathological, vampiric growths, of physical monstrosities resulting from occult causes of which there were traditions among the black races of both Africa and America. He put pressure upon the shell. It broke with a brittle snap, like the dead body of an insect. Beneath he saw the flesh, red and utterly skinless. Before his eyes, as the air struck it, it began to discolor. The process of decay, only arrested by the presence of the bulb covering, set in so rapidly that he drew back with a cry of utter nausea.

"Robert Dupont!"

The voice came to him, faint, and far away, not through his physical hearing but directly to his subconscious self. With the voice there swept over him an influence he recognized, the force of the Mystery Mind he had vanquished twice before.

"Do you begin to understand," queried the voice, "the power of the curse of the Devil God? Phantom Face was my priest Carno, who betrayed the secret of the sacred treasure. For punishment he was forced to wear the bridal veil of horror; he was sent forth to recover the secret and so redeem himself. But he has failed. Now he is twice accursed."

Suddenly Dupont squared his shoulders. What was there about this influence that he should fear it? He brought his own power to bear, driving away the thought force of his mysterious enemy.

"Do you brave the curse of the Devil God?" asked the voice, but very, very faintly.

Dupont laughed. A final effort of will and the atmosphere cleared, as spring air after a storm. But at the same moment the light pattering of feet behind him caught his ear. He turned, too late. He caught the flash of some weapon in the dim candlelight; then knew no more.

XVII

THE SECRET PASSAGEWAY

PAUL NOYES made no effort to touch Violet. Rather, as she shrank away from him, he became embarrassed and ill at ease.

"I hope you will pardon me, Miss Bronson," he exclaimed. "I do hope you will appreciate the desperate necessity of my course. It—it was quite necessary to take advantage of the confidence you placed in me. Usually—usually I am quite a gentleman."

The voice of Vera came to them rather petulantly from the center of the studio, interrupting. "You're a hell of a gentleman, Paul! Forget it!"

He flushed. Violet noticed now the weakness of his chin, the lines of indecision in his face. Undoubtedly he was only a tool of Phantom Face, his work simply to lure her to this studio.

"What do you want, Vera?" he asked, rather sheepishly.

"You—" Ignoring Noyes, she addressed the hunchback sharply. "You, Case, get busy in the bathroom mixing your plaster. You've got to hurry, and besides, I want you out of the way."

Then she gave her attention to Violet and the artist. "You come away from there, Paul, and don't you look at me as I beat it behind the screen. I've old-fashioned ideas and I'm not used to prancing around in gauze."

He colored a bit under the lash of her tongue. Apparently he was decidedly afraid of her. "If you don't need me to help guard Miss Bronson I'll—I'll go out in the bathroom too and help with the plaster."

"By all means go," she snapped. "I'd spare you for the plaster if I'd a dozen little wildcats to watch."

In a moment the two men had left the studio itself. Dacca still lay prone on the floor, unconscious. The slam of the bathroom door indicated that the girls had the full privacy of the larger room.

In the heart of Violet mounted black despair. From her first glance of Vera Collins in the House of Horrors she had feared her. She had not forgotten Nerva's séance. She would never forget the expression upon the face of Vera as the snake-woman raised her arm and stood—with knife poised and pointed directly at her heart. Why should Vera hate her so? She sensed it as a thing deeper and more ingrained than the purposes of the gang, terrible as they were.

The patter of bare feet warned Violet of the approach of the other. She drew into the very

corner of the room, praying that the walls themselves might open and enfold her.

"Afraid of me, li'l Violet?" purred her tormentor. "Well, well!" Then her expression hardened. She realized the passage of time; seemingly she nerved herself to her task. "Strip!" she directed. "Off with all the pretty things!"

"But—" In horror, she knew not of what, Violet literally clung to the clothes upon her.

Vera laughed. "It's not as bad as all that. Here!" She picked up her own undergarments, then indicated the lineman's clothing. "All I want is something decent to get away from this place. As for you"—a shrug, which barely concealed the sheer maliciousness beneath—"you'll do as well in the greasy stuff as anything else. Get into it, or stay in your shimmy if you want, but give me your clothes, and quick."

Still Violet hesitated. Flushing angrily, Vera swung the screen around so that she was shielded. "That suit you any better?" she demanded.

With fingers numbed, as with cold, Violet slipped from her dress, the dress she had donned because she knew it to be one of Robert's favorites. At Vera's sharp request she handed it over the screen, not without a catch of fear in her throat. Then the other girl demanded and obtained, heartlessly, her petticoat and slippers and stockings.

In a daze Violet put on the khaki shirt and rough

dirty trousers discarded by Vera. The cheap material scratched her and was uncomfortable. She looked down at herself and felt a sense of immodesty of attire not so much from the fact they were men's clothing as that they were some one else's clothes. She colored. Then her fear became panic. In her bare feet, forgetting how she looked, thinking of nothing but the mad unreasoning impulse to flee, she started for the door.

Vera caught her with ease. Violet, clutched in the other's arms, discovered the hard muscles of her captor's back, in amazement found herself utterly helpless in the grasp of a woman.

"I can handle Paul," Vera boasted, "so I guess you won't elude me, my shrinking Violet. I used to throw knives in vaudeville, and I was a high diver, and once I pitched for a woman's baseball team, and I wouldn't bet I'm not as strong as that big husky lover of yours, at that."

"What—what do you want with me now?" Violet gasped.

"Come along and see!"

Half leading, half dragging her captive, Vera marched to the bathroom door, opening it and pulling Violet in behind her. The two men, with sleeves rolled up, were bent over the tub. There, with its fine white flecks of solid foam, was a mixture of plaster of paris just about ready to set. This meant nothing to Violet, but upon the

face of Noyes she caught an expression of distaste and fear as he straightened, facing Vera.

"Listen, Vera," he began. "This is a terrible—"

"Stop!" She drew back, making a little courtesy. "Am I not beautiful?" she asked, with apparent irrelevance.

The summery dress might have been made for her. She had removed her wig so that her own hair fell about her ears in attractive disarray. Her mocking smile revealed her teeth and the warm red lure of her lips.

"Am I not beautiful?" she insisted. Then, before he could frame his inarticulate thoughts, she changed. Her mouth twisted, cruel and hard. Her eyes narrowed and darkened as they bored into his gaze. "If you want to love me, Paul Noyes, you will have to do exactly as I wish. Are you willing to give your plaster bath?"

He nodded, unhappy but wholly in her power.

She whirled upon Violet. With the full strength of her fingers she pressed into the flesh of Violet's arms. She leaned forward, so that her breath was burning hot in Violet's face.

"You asked me what I wanted with you. This is what I want. I want your life. You came between me and the man I loved. You are responsible for the death of the man I loved. You allowed him to be torn to pieces by a dog beneath your eyes. While I cannot turn you over to the tender mercies of a beast I can devise

a fitting death. You have been given to me to kill by Phantom Face. I purchased the right to kill you, Violet Bronson. Do you understand? I purchased the right to kill you."

At a motion from Vera the hunchback tied the ankles and hands of the helpless girl, quickly. Noyes, hands trembling, placed cotton in her ears and nose. Then, as he approached with a bit of reed pipe with a rubber arrangement to go in her mouth she understood. The bath was for her. She was to be placed in the plaster. She was to be left to die in an artist's mold extemporized in the tub.

"It will not be a quick death, little Violet," gloated the other woman. "You will be able to breathe, and to do a lot of thinking. And don't take short breaths, because if you do your shroud of plaster may be too tight a fit.

Violet struggled, uselessly. As they lifted her everything went black. Consciousness left her, mercifully.

Her next coherent thought was the realization of a peculiar phenomenon. It seemed to her that she was in the arms of her Robert, clasped tightly to him. But in her half-conscious state she imagined that every time she attempted to take a breath he squeezed her. He was not allowing her to get sufficient air. She was choking to death, slowly. Though she pleaded with him he only laughed, continuing to hold her tight. Then,

suddenly, her thoughts cleared and she understood. She was in the mold. The plaster had hardened. She was not able to move a single muscle. Even an unconscious effort to open her eyes was balked. The sense of oppression came from the fact that the mixture had set while she was unconscious, while she was only taking short and gentle breaths. Now it was impossible for her to fill her lungs. Her throat was caught so that she could not make a sound, even through the tube. In the sheer horror of it she fainted once more.

When she awoke again she lay in bed, in her own room. Beside her was Doctor Sutton, reading, waiting for her to wake.

At first it seemed impossible that she could be alive. She wanted to believe the experience a nightmare, but on a chair within her view were the boy's clothes she had obtained from Vera. They were covered with the plaster and were indisputable evidence of the reality of her ordeal.

"How did you find me?" she asked abruptly, rising in the bed.

"Oh!" Doctor Sutton was startled. "Dacca returned to consciousness while they were in the bathroom with you. He saw what they were doing through the door, which was not quite closed. He stole out and came for me and the police."

"Did you catch them?"

"No! No one was there when we arrived."

"The picture—?"

"Is safe!" His eyes softened. "Dacca told me how they tricked you. You could not suspect that our neighbor was one of them."

Now that it was over, she began to feel of herself. "Am I—am I all right?"

"They wrapped a towel about your head and put cotton in your ears and nose. The plaster wasn't very hard. Dacca and one of the policemen scooped it out with their hands."

"Vera Collins—that's the woman—made me give her my clothes. That's why you found me in those," Violet explained, pointing toward the chair.

Sutton slipped an arm about her. "Now don't you worry about anything," he directed, kissing her. "Go to sleep and rest up. They won't trouble us again now."

As she nestled beneath the covers another question struck her. "Is Robert—"

"He'll probably be here by the time you wake up. So turn over and close your eyes, for Daddy Doctor."

Leaving her, he switched off all the lights but a little lamp on the reading table. He left the door to the balcony ajar, so she could call if anything frightened her. Though she felt a strange, oddly compelling impulse to stop him, to wrap her arms about him, telling him how much she loved him, how much she appreciated his kindnesses, how he had been the only parent she

ever had known, she refrained. She could not know she would never see him again, that her own pet name for him would be the last two words she would ever hear pass his lips.

Sleep did not come easily. She dozed, after a while, but woke once more. Her eyes seemed very rebellious and again she sensed the impulse to call her guardian. Tossing restlessly it seemed to her that the time passed interminably.

Finally she heard Doctor Sutton mount the stairs. She heard him come into the room to see if she was all right, and because she did not wish to distress him she pretended to be asleep. When he left he closed the door. Then she lay, with eyes wide, studying the wall near the little lamp for the sheer lack of something better to do.

Suddenly a most amazing thing happened. The wall, as she watched it, moved. A panel slid aside, noiselessly, revealing the entrance to a secret passageway. In an instant her heart was in her mouth. This was the wholly unexpected explanation to the presence of Canfield in her room, the disappearance of his body, and the escape of Vera. What threatened now? Though she tried to scream she found she could only lie motionless, in fascinated horror. Who—who was the intruder?

It was the fox! With his distinctive noiseless tread Renard stepped into the room boldly, glancing about with quick, practiced eye. He did not

seem surprised to find Violet awake but moved to her side at once, placing a hand over her mouth. At that she started to struggle, but too late. He picked her up with ease, as though she were a child, wrapping her bed-covering about her as he did so. Then he carried her into the passageway, closing the panel behind him and descending stairs to the level of the studio floor and Dacca's quarters. As Violet rather surmised, the secret way opened at the other end into the smaller apartment of Paul Noyes.

Here another man was waiting. She was given no chance for observation, but was gagged and blindfolded immediately. Some additional covering was wrapped around her. Though she struggled she only succeeded in exhausting herself. No clear recollection of her journey remained with her, except a sensation of covering a great distance, of being carried up and down many stairs at both beginning and end. The machine, she sensed, was a limousine with the curtains drawn. The air within was very close.

Renard spoke just once.

"Vera never did anything thoroughly in her life," he muttered.

After all was over she heard the voice of Vera herself, also raised in complaint. She realized suddenly that she had slept, because the blindfold and gag were removed.

"If he knew how I hated her," murmured Vera,

in tones which left no doubt of her feelings, "he wouldn't ask me to get her dressed."

Violet opened her eyes. She was in a tiny room without windows, lighted by a single electric bulb. Vera and another woman, whom she recognized as the one who took her clothes from the House of Horrors, were seated, watching her. She lay on a rough couch bed. On Vera's lap was the summer dress, the petticoat, the shoes and stockings she had been compelled to surrender in the studio, now apparently to be returned to her.

Hurried by the women, who paid no attention to her request for privacy, she donned her things. Then she was taken through several long and crooked corridors to a sort of meeting room, draped and hung entirely in black. Here were dimly shadowed men whom she could not see clearly enough to identify. At the far end sat a shrouded figure at a table between two candles placed on tall stands and furnishing the only light in the chamber. Trembling, Violet was conducted to this individual, the leader of the others.

"Where is the map of the route to the treasure of the Devil God?" he demanded in a sepulchral voice.

"I—I don't know," she faltered.

With a quick gesture her questioner revealed his face, to frighten her. He was the horrible creature of her dream, the cyclops, Evil Eye!

Crying out in terror she leaped back, but her guards held her.

"Where is the map of the route to the treasure of the Devil God?"

Again she shook her head. At that she was whisked away by strong hands. Her wrists and feet were tied. She was taken through a damp hall and flung, helpless, upon a stone floor, where she was left alone. No light of any kind penetrated the blackness, no sound the silence of her prison.

XVIII

DAWN

IT was Sunday morning at Lawncrest. The grass was brilliantly green; the walks, sprinkled late the night before, were glistening. Across the street the three-story frame house of the Sterlings stood proudly in the eastern sun, flaunting to the community its fresh coat of red paint trimmed with white. On the porch, Johnny, the dignified possessor of a new sailor suit and a clipped hair cut, whistled shrilly for Violet.

She was not quite ready, so he went on ahead. The Catholic Church bell was ringing for nine-thirty mass, which meant it was time for Sunday-school at the Presbyterian Church. Violet was late. Yet she could not hurry Katy, for there were snarls in her curls which simply would not come out.

Philip Carter stopped by to call for her. That was quite a thrill because Philip had been promised long trousers when they bought his winter suit, and Philip had taken her behind the barn once and allowed her to watch while he rolled a cigarette—without spilling a bit—and smoked it,

blowing the smoke from his nose and wiggling his ears at the same time.

Would Katy never hurry? When she started off finally Violet knew that Sunday-school was nearly over. She would never get a text, never. And when she tried to run something held her, and she couldn't. Sure enough, the Presbyterian bell began to ring. Its deep, booming tones, struck through and through her. Church began in fifteen minutes. Never had she been as late as this. Once more she tried to run, and when she found her muscles would not respond to her will there came over her a strange, terrible, burning, tired feeling—a sensation she had never known before.

Again the deep-toned bell boomed out its call to service. Now she ran, swift, fleet, realizing that people stared at her in surprise to see a little girl all dressed up in white and running like this on the Sabbath day. But the church seemed to be farther and farther away from her. The more effort she used the more distant became her goal. The all-powerful numbing sensation stole over her again. Then she realized it was only a dream, and she remembered.

Evil Eye! Vera! She was in the clutches of her enemies. She lay, uncomfortable, tied and helpless, in some unknown place of horror.

But the church bell? Faint, unaccountable, there came to her ears the echo of the deep tone

reminiscent of Sunday-school and her childhood. First she thought it was a ringing carried from a distance. Finally she identified the sound as near at hand, as though a bell hung over her, as though some living thing were stroking it, gently.

She tried to turn, but her bonds were too secure. Movement was impossible. The damp stone beneath her caused her to ache at every point of contact. The night seemed endless, and of the dawn and her fate she could form not the slightest conception.

She attempted to conjure up the image of Robert in her mind. She felt that even the recollection of Dupont's characteristic tenderness would be a comfort to her now. But into her consciousness there intruded always the figure of Vera Collins. Under the strain of her many ordeals Violet found that the considerations of fear overbalanced her instincts of faith, of hope, and trust.

Again she lived the scene in the artist's bathroom. Again she saw Vera curtsy in the borrowed dress, fascinating Paul Noyes deliberately so as to bend him to her purpose.

Now the recollection was followed by a peculiar sense of the presence of the snake-woman. She closed her eyes, and that, in some manner beyond her comprehension, caused the appearance of a sort of moving tableau, vividly colorful, much as a living motion picture projected into her con-

sciousness. Was it an apparition? Was this psychic sight, clairvoyance? Or was she dreaming again; was it a nightmare?

Whatever it was, she saw the belfry of a church, with a huge bell hung from the end of a rotting rope. She saw Vera and Paul Noyes, the artist, who protested as before, only doing Vera's bidding under the compulsion of her charm. She saw him lean out until he touched the rope. She saw him smear the rope with some substance in his hand, after which he drew back, leaving with the girl. She saw, finally, the appearance of a host of huge, voracious rats, sleek and brown, who attacked the rope greedily, clambering up and down and around and over and under each other, until it swarmed with them.

She shuddered, not understanding. Obviously the artist had placed cheese upon the rope to lure the rats. But why? Did it indicate danger to her, or was it merely a phantasy of her fears?

As if in answer to her questions the dawn broke, very suddenly. A ghostly light began to penetrate through to her prison, so that she could make out the dim outlines of the walls, so that she could grasp her situation. Evidently it was a pit of some sort. The floor was cement, as she could tell from its feel. The ceiling seemed a great distance above her. As the light became stronger it seemed as if there was no ceiling. Was it a tower, or a hole in the ground, of great depth?

Suddenly something dropped upon her ankle. She felt a wince of pain. Then the object woke to life, scrambling to feet with claws which she felt, scampering off as if in fear. A rat! Unquestionably a rat. At that moment there was a perceptible increase in the light, and she grasped the terrible menace of her position. Now she could distinguish above her a hanging bell, a heavy, rusty bell, swaying very slightly in a morning breeze. This was the tower of a church. From the dust and dirt and signs of neglect she knew it was an abandoned church.

To her ears, sharpened by fright, there came the steady sound of a gnawing and scraping. The rats! They were at the rope. In a moment there was a quick, sharp snap, the parting of a strand. Then the steady sound of the tiny busy teeth came to her without interruption until the snap of another strand gave her additional warning of her danger.

She was directly beneath the bell. Its weight was sufficient to cause a fearful mangling death the moment it dropped. In horror she screamed, over and over and over again. In the echoing walls her cries were fright-impelling. Yet she knew they would not carry much beyond the top of the tower. No cry would be heard through the heavy walls of masonry. Meanwhile the barely audible crunching above continued. The light of day increased gradually in strength.

And at regular intervals the snapping of the strands brought her more and more near to the end.

She became still, and watched in hopeless, silent horror until the sun rose and cast a tiny spot of brightness upon a bit of upper wall. She took to counting the snapping strands, wondering at the thickness of the rope which could have so many. Then her eyes closed in spite of herself. Nervous exhaustion, fed by fright, claimed her.

She woke to find herself lying still in the pit beneath the bell. The spot of sunlight had moved, testifying to an hour or more of unconsciousness. In sudden wonderment she listened, intently. Had the whole thing been a dream, a nightmare?

Why otherwise did the rope still hold? As she listened there came the faint quick-clicking snap which had terrified her. Following it was a scratching, like the crunching of a dozen sets of tiny teeth. She screamed.

XIX

CLAIRVOYANCE

DUPONT examined the bandages of his head gingerly.

"Haven't any Scotch blood in you, have you?" queried the surgeon.

"Scotch blood?" Dupont was still a little dazed. He had returned to consciousness in the dormitory at precinct headquarters without any clear idea of just what had happened to him. "Scotch blood?" he repeated.

"Yes. Next to a negro a Scot is supposed to have the very thickest skull outside of a museum."

"Oh!" Dupont's smile was very faint. "It was a good blow, then?"

The sergeant, the third of the group, spoke up at that. The story of the bricks had gone around. Upon top of that Dupont had found what he had failed to find, the secret passage-way. When the police returned to the scene of their raid all further clues to the gang had been removed.

"Sure," he muttered, "it would have served you right if they'd croaked you. I had a man left there. You could have taken him in with

you—you could have called to him when you found the secret door."

"How did you find me? Did your man hear something?"

"He said he heard you cry out and then there was some kind of crash, as if something fell. He rushed in. You were on the floor of the little room behind the false wall."

"There was no sign of who did it?"

"Nothing but a billy lying on the floor."

"Did—did you find a dead man on the bed?"

"Yeh! Poor devil, his face was all burned, with acid."

"Burned?" Dupont half rose. He remembered the horrible mask.

"That's what the Medical Examiner said."

"But I saw—" Dupont checked himself. He did not wish to be laughed at, yet he was sure that he had seen, had touched, a strange, unusual vampiric growth; that he had discovered an almost unbelievable psychic phenomenon.

"He said it was a simple case of acid burn," the sergeant reiterated.

Dupont turned to the surgeon. "How about my head?"

"I'll dress it again to-morrow. Meanwhile you'd better go home and take it easy. You're all right now, but no sense in overexerting."

Dupont looked at his watch. It was not quite nine o'clock, and from the sunlight in the room

it was morning. The raid had been at about five; it must have been seven or after when he found the secret door and the body of Phantom Face. This was surprisingly little time.

"You—you fixed me up quickly," he remarked.

"Quickly?" Then the surgeon saw the watch in his hand. "Quickly? Why man, you've been unconscious nearly twenty-four hours. At first I wasn't sure you didn't have a badly fractured skull, that you weren't finished for good. This isn't the day you think it is, it's the next morning."

Dupont rose to his feet weakly, with an exclamation. Twenty-four hours! At once he thought of Violet, and of Doctor Sutton, and Dacca. Were they all right? While he was following Kali, while he was trapping Renard and some of the important members of the gang, he felt that he was protecting the girl, that he was accomplishing something. But now that the raid was a failure he was sure the band would redouble their efforts. There would enter into their calculations the motive of revenge. And a day—a whole day and night had passed while he lay here unconscious.

"Did you notify anyone about my injury?" he asked, eagerly.

"I phoned your apartment," explained the surgeon, "but they said you had closed it about a week ago, that you were away."

Violet, then, knew nothing. He broke away as

rapidly as possible, calling a taxi and racing to the studio. In response to his ring there was a very cautious opening of the door on the chain, but when Doctor Sutton recognized him there was no mistaking the warmth and relief of the older man's greeting.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "I—I don't know what to do, which way to turn. Violet has been kidnaped again!"

Feverishly Dupont demanded explanations. He heard of the attempt to bury her alive in plaster. He questioned Dacca and learned that when Doctor Sutton went up to bed the evening before the black had remained awake the entire night upon the stairs, watching. Violet had vanished from her room as mysteriously as the body of the man the dog killed, as unacountably as Vera Collins when she masqueraded as a telephone repair man.

The thought of a possible secret passageway, suggested by the one in the den of Phantom Face, urged him to a careful search of her room. He found no clue or indication of a hidden door, nor did any of the panels ring hollow to his tapping. Later he found it, from Violet's description. Now it baffled his best efforts.

From the superintendent of the building he obtained access to Paul Noyes' studio adjoining. Here were still the signs of the plaster and of the attempt of Vera upon the life of the girl. But

he could find no clue which would be of any assistance in his present search.

It was necessary to get in touch with some member of the gang, or to find some clue to their other haunts, or else to wait for them to strike again. The last course was utterly out of the question with Violet in danger. By telephone he arranged with the detective agency to keep operatives watching the shack where the raid had occurred and the coffee house of Luis. Though they reported that this last had obviously changed hands it was yet possible that some clue would develop, that something would happen at either place to put him on the trail again.

He knew that the portrait of Steele would act as bait to draw them. After considerable discussion with Doctor Sutton he cut the canvas from the frame, and in Doctor Sutton's room peeled off a section of heavy burlap wall paper, tacking it back again with the picture behind. It was a clever hiding place which would not be obvious except upon very careful and close inspection, and there was no time for a more painstaking job. Even Dacca was not shown the spot in which the painting was concealed.

With no report from his detectives, no sign or hint of the gang, no word from Violet, he made a careful investigation of the employees of the building. From one night man he learned that two strangers had asked for Doctor Sutton, had

ridden to the floor boldly, had started for the door of the studio, but had not been seen afterward.

By wholesale generosity with his tips, he awakened an interest among the taxi drivers at the stand around the corner. Just before noon they brought him a driver who had watched a limousine come up, who had noticed two men enter the building and return, carrying out a third—at least it seemed to be a man, and in the last stages of intoxication—but this chauffeur had not been sufficiently curious to note what direction the car had taken after it pulled away.

So there were no clues; there was nothing Dupont could do. Violet might be facing death, or torture, or dishonor. He was helpless.

At lunch, which Dacca insisted upon serving, Doctor Sutton made a suggestion with a great deal of trepidation.

"Do you—do you think, Robert, you could learn anything by clairvoyant means?"

Dupont settled back in thought. At an early stage of his occult studies he had attempted the cultivation of second sight. The results had not been satisfactory enough to suit the scientist in him. Though he had glimpsed a few colorful pictures, always they had been incoherent, foolish, and meaningless. Hypnotism, and the use of mind in therapeutics, seemed so much more worth while as a field for his efforts that clairvoyance

had barely interested him. But now! Violet was in danger. No possible means of helping her should be neglected.

"I'll try," he said, not over hopefully.

First he attempted to achieve the necessary blankness of mind and impression while seated at the table. He lowered his head, clasping his hands in his lap, resolutely driving all thoughts and worry from his consciousness. But it was as though he tried to pump water from a sieve. Little flashes of her face and hands, little memories of her mannerisms, little snatches of her conversation would dart in, interrupting. Then Dacca traveled to and from the pantry, clearing the things. Deep despair radiated from the man. It was a cloud of gloom so thick that Dupont felt he could cut it with a knife. Even Doctor Sutton's anxiety, as the scientist leaned forward, intruded.

He went into the little den, drawing Nerva's heavy curtains and plunging himself in blackness. On the couch there he lay back, shutting his eyes, again striving desperately to clear his mind for psychic messages. It was useless. Something of Nerva's sordid clientele clung to the room. He caught strange, unrelated impressions, of petty impulses and trivial problems, of nervous irritations and empty suspicions—the effluvia of the people her cheap practice had brought to her.

Hurrying upstairs he found the quiet he wished in his own room. But even then he succeeded in

conjuring up nothing but a few vague colors and dull clouds, only the veriest fringe of clairvoyancy. Disgusted, he remembered three brief lessons he once had taken from a Hindu. He recalled the Eastern postures, used by students in India to induce second sight. Stripping off his upper garments he squatted on the floor with head bent, his eyes in contemplation of his solar plexus. The results were as fruitless as the other attempts.

If only he possessed a crystal ball! Finally he recalled that an ordinary glass of water to a considerable extent would serve the same purpose. Calming himself by a great effort of will, determined this time to succeed, he settled himself before a table, the tumbler clasped in both hands just before him, the only light in the room behind him, and very dim.

To his joy he sensed the vague currents up and down his spine, the chills of the sympathetic nervous system which presaged psychic sight. He began to see the swirling gray clouds, followed by the aimless flashing of the brilliant astral colors. Impressing upon his subconscious self his desire to learn the situation of Violet, he waited, very patiently.

Faint sounds of music struck his ears, then all at once a scene opened up before him, like the view through a narrow window at some distance in the darkness. First he saw a church, and recognized it, a deserted structure at the very

outskirts of the city, a landmark upon the top of a hill overlooking one of the principal motor roads.

Then it was as though the first scene faded into a second, as in a moving picture. Now he viewed a close-up, a closer view of a top corner of the tower. Here the joints of the bricks were plainly distinguishable. The ivy, which climbed to the very base of the weathercock, waved around the corner of the window-like opening to the belfry. Swinging ever so slightly in a summer breeze was the old bell, rusted and coated with the floating dirt from the highway far below. Near the tower was a gigantic dead tree, left from the days when there was a forest on the hill, when it was a monarch rearing a proud head above its neighbors.

One branch reached the tower. Its stubby end, broken by the edge of the masonry in some past storm, was carried against the brick by the slight sway of the tree. As he saw the scene, so he heard the sound. With a quick, sharp snap the stump would slip beyond the edge of the brickwork. Then the back swing would drag it across the mortar with a crunching, dull sound, not unlike the gnawing of a rat's teeth. The ivy was torn by this constant friction over the same spot, over and over again. Once Dupont, by some subconscious psychic faculty, heard the snap and the dragging crunch. Then he heard a piercing, muffled scream. Violet!

He threw the glass of water from him. He

phoned desperately for a touring car. Resuming his discarded garments, leaving most of his buttons for attention in the machine, he raced downstairs, and drove madly to the church. Doctor Sutton he left to attend to other clues. He depended upon his weapon, his wits, and his hypnotic power, to rescue her. At his destination he ran to the front door of the old church, trying it; then he dashed around the side. At a spot shielded against observation from the road the ground suddenly gave way beneath him. As he fell, grasping frantically for support, he realized that it was a trap; that a second time he had displayed his folly in attempting to save her single-handed.

XX

THE RUTHLESS HAND

THE pit in which Dupont found himself had been designed to furnish light for a basement window in the church. The window, however, had long been bricked up. The other three sides of the narrow space were neatly fitted slabs of rock, chiseled smooth and affording neither finger nor toe hold. In time the seepage from the ground had given a fine coating of slippery moss-growth to the stone, while the bricks, with their particular tendency to absorb moisture, were covered with green slime. The top of the masonry was just above Dupont's reach. Although bits of the thin boards placed above the hole in the construction of the trap had fallen with him, there was nothing of sufficient strength or substance to be of any help whatever. He could find no way of clambering out.

What would be the result? The chauffeur, down at the bottom of the hill, waiting on the road, knew nothing of his purpose in coming here. Any member of the gang approaching the car could send the man away with a trumped up

message, or at the least could pay the bill and dismiss the machine. Doctor Sutton was only aware that his destination was an abandoned church near the outskirts of the city. It would be some time before the scientist would ask outside help; the task of locating a disused ecclesiastical structure in the outlying sections of metropolitan New York would be colossal.

All at once Dupont detected footsteps. He drew his revolver. Grim lines of determination settled about his mouth. He backed against the bricked-up window so as to cover the three sides of the pit away from the building. He heard the steps come close to the edge of the opening; then halt, cautiously. He waited, determined, watching alertly for the first sight of the other.

Instead of a head, or a living figure, there appeared very slowly the rounded edge of some small object. With disgust, almost despair, he grasped its nature. A mirror! A small pocket mirror so held as to give the person above a view down into the pit.

"Drop the revolver!" came the command in a high-pitched wheezy voice. "Drop it at your feet and keep your hands up!"

Dupont complied with ill grace. Then he waited.

Slowly, cautiously still, a man's face appeared over the edge. It was a fat flabby face, with bright curious eyes set in tiny piggish sockets. An involuntary wink betrayed his identity to the

hypnotist, who remembered Violet's description. The hunchback, and a member of the gang!

"Who are you?" asked the little man. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Dupont smiled very slightly. The hunchback had not been warned against his hypnotic power by those of the band who had learned to fear it. From the moment the head appeared above his eyes had fixed the eyes of the other.

"I was just looking around," he said. While his lips framed the answer his glance carried the message of his mind. "You are in my power!" he exulted, inwardly. "Independence of action is impossible to you. You are prepared to obey my wishes. Answer me! Speak! Tell me you are ready to do exactly as I dictate!"

"What—what do you want me to do?" quavered the hunchback, his eyes now dilated and his mouth agape.

"Drop down here by my side!"

With a distinctly ungraceful scrambling awkwardness, precipitating a cloud of dirt, the little man obeyed instructions. Dupont stooped, pocketing his own weapon. Then he searched his captive, finding a knife and a small caliber revolver of archaic design which he also pocketed.

"Where is Miss Bronson?" he asked. "You are entirely subject to me," he added, in mind. "You can only answer truthfully."

"She is a prisoner in the church."

"Is she guarded?"

"She is guarded by Lydia, my wife."

"Is the rest of the gang in the church?"

"Vera Collins, and Paul Noyes, the artist, and"—even in a hypnotic state the hunchback lowered his voice—"and Evil Eye!'

"Where are the others?"

"Renard, and Dupree, and Kali went into the city."

"Is that all?"

"There are no other members of the gang, now."

"Is Miss Bronson in danger?"

"No."

"How is she guarded? Where are those in the church?"

"The prisoner is in a little room just behind the bell tower. Lydia, my wife, sits with her. Vera Collins and Paul Noyes are waiting for orders in the back hall. Evil Eye"—again the lowered voice—"Evil Eye is in his room—the Black Grotto—in front."

"Does anyone besides you suspect I am here?"

"No."

"Then I will be able to rescue Miss Bronson?"

"No."

"Why?"

"You cannot enter the basement except in back. Vera Collins has an electric warning button. At its flash Evil Eye will call Miss Bronson to him. She will be killed."

"Killed?" Dupont felt a sudden chill of apprehension. The hunchback had said before she was in no danger.

"No one can see the face of Evil Eye and live. The girl is safe until Evil Eye solves the mystery of the map of the route to the treasure of the Devil God, but she shall never escape alive."

For a moment the hypnotist hesitated. He knew that in these questions and answers he was simply availing himself of the mind of the subject under his control, a mind more intelligent and possessed of more reasoning faculty than he had anticipated. He knew, also, that the hunchback, after the spell was broken, would carry no recollection of the dialogue whatever. Yet there was something uncannily strange about this consultation with one of the gang against every will and wish of the man's normal self. It was a fearful tribute to his power.

"If I came with a force of police," Dupont went on, "and broke in from several sides at once, so that Evil Eye and Vera and Noyes and your wife all were caught at once, then wouldn't I be able to save Miss Bronson?"

"Yes."

"And no alarm will be given, nothing will happen to frighten them or make them change their plans or be in any different situation by the time I get back with the police if I prevent you warning them—that is right, isn't it?"

"Yes, that is right."

Dupont prepared to plunge the hunchback into a state of cataleptic sleep when another thought struck him.

"Why did Renard and the two others go into the city?"

"To get the portrait of Steele."

"To Doctor Sutton's studio?" This was a sudden menace to Violet's guardian he had not expected. Again he felt the chill of apprehension.

"Yes," was the answer in the colorless, matter-of-fact, disinterested tones of his subject.

"Is—is there any chance of harm coming to Doctor Sutton?"

"If he does not reveal the secret of the portrait, or of the map, Renard has been instructed to kill him."

In an instant Dupont made up his mind. Violet was in danger, but no immediate danger. Sutton's peril was pressing. He would prepare to raid the church, but first he would flash the alarm into the city, would hurry to make sure of the safety of the scientist. That, he knew, would be the wish of Violet.

Fixing the eyes of the little man huddled closely to him in the cramped quarters of the pit, he plunged him first into a state of unconscious sleep, then fixed his body in a state of cataleptic rigidity which would baffle all the skill of science. Looking at his watch he addressed the hunchback in a

low voice, impressively, repeating the instructions three times.

"You will remain in this condition until midnight! You will remain in this condition until midnight! You will remain in this condition until midnight!"

It was now late afternoon. Dupont clambered to the shoulders of his victim, who might have been made of stone. Stealing around the corner of the crumbling church, he skulked half down the hill, then ran at top speed to the car still waiting.

"The nearest police-signal station!" he gasped.

Through the police exchange he got in touch with the officials with whom he had planned his last raid. It was arranged to have the church surrounded immediately, but to have the men lie back and await the return of Dupont, only stopping anyone who should arrive or leave. A squad, meanwhile, was dispatched to Doctor Sutton's studio.

Dupont found them there upon his own arrival. The sergeant he knew, with a long face, greeted him at the elevator.

"Sure, and we were too late," he muttered, a smoldering anger evident beneath his sympathy.

"What—" Dupont suddenly broke into a run, distancing the sergeant down the hall, breaking in past the policeman at the door.

The studio was an utter wreck. Curtains, hangings, ornaments, were down, strewn this way and that. Not a piece of furniture but was broken

and split to kindling wood, deliberately, and in apparent pursuit of a definite purpose. The rugs were thrown aside. In several spots the floor was ripped up, ruining the magnificent parquetry.

A hasty glance showed Dupont no signs of Sutton or Dacca. He looked in the kitchen and pantry, the den, and Dacca's quarters. Everywhere was the same vandalism. He sprinted up the stairs, and in Doctor Sutton's own room found the scientist stretched upon the floor, lifeless.

Upon the man's face was an expression of horror and terror beyond belief. The white hair of the savant was stained dull red from the blows and bruises on his head. The clothes were torn away from his chest, revealing the cuts of some sharp instrument in crisscross designs. His feet, bare, were covered with huge gray-white blisters and red-blue burns. A fire of papers still burning in the grate gave mute testimony to his torture.

Involuntarily Dupont's eyes strayed to the wall. Half the paper was down. The portrait of Steele was gone. His benefactor, by methods worthy of the lowest savages, had been forced to tell the hiding place.

Stupefied, the hypnotist questioned the police almost incoherently. Only by a supreme effort of will could he force himself to action. When the apartment was searched thoroughly for clues, yielding nothing of value, he suggested an investigation of the adjoining quarters, which he still

believed connected in some mysterious way, but without hope, without courage, with the very heart torn from him.

In Paul Noyes's studio the signs of another struggle were revealed before them in full gruesomeness of detail. Square in the middle of the floor, in a pool of blood barely congealed, Dacca and Kali lay dead, locked in their death grapple. How Dacca pursued his quarry through the secret passageway, just how he sold his life for the old scientist, Dupont never knew.

The shock of the second death, the testimony of the faithfulness of his man, had the effect of nerving Dupont. Before him still was the rescue of Violet. Impressed upon him as never before was the quality of her danger.

With the police behind him he led the raid in the dusk of early evening. At first he thought he had the gangsters surprised, as no sound came from the church; then his forces were greeted with a fusillade of shots. There were no fatalities; likewise there were no results. Some hidden exit enabled all the emissaries of the Devil God to escape. A scream led him to Violet, to a door at the end of a dingy corridor, damp, and infested with cobwebs which clung to his face. As he seized the knob she screamed again.

"Don't!" she called, frantically. "Don't come in! If you open the door you plunge me to my death!"

XXI

VIOLET'S BIRTHDAY

FROM the window Dupont glanced out upon Washington Square, which was bustling with the life of mid-afternoon. Immediately before him was the sector allotted by unwritten law to the well-dressed children of the houses on the north, and their nurses. Here was aristocracy which disdained to move to West End Avenue, or Forest Hills, or Westchester County. Beyond were the irrepressible offspring of the Italians dwelling to the south. They swam in the fountain, scrambled beneath the wheels of Fifth Avenue busses for pennies, or swarmed over forbidden tracts of grass. Behind were Bohemian quarters and Village shops, a garage, and a church designed by Stanford White.

Then his glance strayed to the girl beside him. For all her terrors Violet had suffered no permanent hurt. She was dressed in black still, in memory of her beloved guardian. Dupont was just human enough to realize that the garb was immensely becoming; that her hair, which coiled

high and proudly above the wide level-placing of her eyes, glistened yellow as brass in a lathe, and formed with the somber circle of her gown below a glorious frame for almost perfect features. He was selfish enough to exult in the fact that she was to be his. He drew her a little closer to him with the involuntary contraction of muscles in an arm which had fought for her, valiantly.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed. "It's over!"

'Robert!" Her lips were full and red in protest. "You promised not to mention the horrible experiences of—of those eight days." The tears welled up in her eyes, brimming beneath her lashes. "Poor dear Doctor Daddy!" she added.

He was very contrite as he kissed her. "Forgive me," he murmured.

"Besides—" Very suddenly she flung her arms about his neck, wholly without reserve. Now she held no thought of attempting to do without him, of facing her enemies alone. Gone was the girlish courage of the morning she had sent him from her. Spare him she could not. "Besides," she confessed, "I'm afraid—I'm afraid it's far from over. I feel terribly frightened, Robert."

"It's more than two weeks since anything has happened," he suggested, reassuringly. "There has been no word, no sight or sign of the gang."

Her voice became a whisper. "I had a dream last night, again. I don't remember it clearly, but it was all about Phantom Face and Evil

Eye and Vera Collins and the hunchback. It may be a warning."

"Nonsense! It is just the natural reaction. And now to-day's your eighteenth birthday, and all their threats were to be executed against you before your birthday."

"Do you suppose—" She checked herself, blanching.

"What?"

"Could—could they be waiting to learn the provisions of my father's will? The lawyer is coming this afternoon to read it. Could that be the reason they have left us alone?"

"Hardly!" He spoke with decision but it was a disquieting thought. "You know they have done nothing since they obtained possession of the portrait of Stuart Steele. That may have been what they were after all the time. I believe it's over."

She shuddered. "I don't. I—I feel it isn't, in here." She put a hand over her heart, raising lips again for his kiss.

Inwardly, however, Dupont agreed with her. The little band of their enemies had been too determined, too ruthless, too desperately unscrupulous, to believe that they would fade away silently, that they would leave Violet and himself in peace. If the picture of Steele had been their sole objective there would be no explanation for the viciousness of their attacks upon Violet. He

remembered the attempt to burn her to death in an abandoned chemical works, he recalled Vera's double effort to take her life, once by the throwing of a knife while in a supposed hypnotic trance, once by burying her alive in an extemporized mold of plaster of paris. Too, he recollected Canfield's brutal attack upon her in her room, from which she was saved only by the dog.

Last of all, and perhaps most vivid in his mind, was the danger besetting her in the abandoned church.

"Don't come in!" The terror in her voice came to him sharply and clearly again. "If you open the door you plunge me to my death!"

At the moment of her cry the acrid pungent odor of a chemically fed fire had struck him. Through the cracks and crevices of the doorway had come the smoke in perceptibly increasing volume even as he hesitated. When he crashed through the panel with his fist he found her poised on a narrow ledge where it had been almost impossible for her to cling. In the decay of the old structure the floor had fallen and Violet, escaping from her cellar prison in the excitement of the attack, had clambered up the wreckage, had grasped at her frail support just as the rotten beams and planking collapsed beneath her weight. While poised there helpless, because the door opened inward, she had been aware suddenly of a movement below her. Case,

the hunchback, had spread over the tinder-dry wood the contents of some jar with a single broad sweep. He had set a match to it, the flames had virtually leaped at her feet at the moment she heard Dupont, as he had grasped the knob of the door.

Now she was safe. But did the two weeks of freedom from attack mean anything? Both were silent; their thoughts busy.

Into the garishly furnished, almost cluttered front parlor of the Washington Square home flounced a rather stout and florid figure. Her dress was a heavy taffeta which rustled riotously. A long chain of china beads and several bracelets and numerous other ornaments collaborated in the near production of a clatter. Tied about her, however, was a kitchen apron, as out of place as overalls at a palace. A big splotch of flour on her cheek made ludicrous the effect of a coiffure remarkable and immaculate.

"Aunt Julia!" Violet exclaimed.

"What do you think?" gasped the intruder. This sister of Doctor Sutton, never on speaking terms with the scientist in his lifetime and as a consequence hardly ever civil to Violet either as a child or young woman, now sought to make up everything to the girl by the quantity and quality of her attention. "What do you think?" she repeated, sitting cautiously upon the edge of a chair, so as to impose no strain upon the up-

holstery. "I sent Thelma out to get the candles for your birthday cake and she only bought a dozen. Isn't that crass stupidity? And they wonder I oppose immigration at the Fortnightly Club. Mercy!"

Violet smiled. "It isn't necessary to have eighteen candles on my cake, is it, Aunt Julia? I'm a big girl now, you know."

"Violet!" Miss Julia Sutton, whom no one had ever suspected to be three years older than her brother, gestured with a manicured finger, severely. "If I'm making this cake it's going to be exactly right. I sent Thelma out for more candles and—and I'll have you know this is a genuine, old-fashioned, homemade cake. I'm using ten eggs, and at eighty cents a dozen, too!"

"But—"

"Don't interrupt! This is to be a good luck cake, too. Eighteen is a fine number in occult science. It is two nines, and nine is most important, most important indeed according to the Pythagorean system of cosmology."

"Whew!" Dupont whistled as she hurried back to her kitchen.

Violet slapped his face, playfully. "You shan't make fun of her!" she exclaimed. "Who knows you may not be just as funny to people with your hypnotism as she is with her science of numbers?"

"But it's a fad with her. She goes to hear every Swami who lands in the country, she travels

to California to join every theosophical colony that starts out there, and now she isn't happy until I spend half of every evening knocking knees and playing with her on the ouija board."

"But she's done everything for me since Doctor Daddy was killed."

"That's true." Dupont looked out the window. After all, the old lady had few interests in life. A spinster, she had been dependent upon her clubs for social intercourse. She was only one of very many thousands swept a little beyond the point of rationality in the rising wave of enthusiasm for things occult. "Is this the lawyer?" he asked suddenly, as a man turned in at the gate.

The representative of the executors of the Sutton and Bronson estates was a fussy little man who was delighted when Miss Julia Sutton, camping square upon the realization of her social position, insisted that tea be served by the sniffing Thelma before the document was read. To Dupont the delay was irksome, the actual intoning of the lengthy provisions of the legal instrument an ordeal. He reached over, taking Violet's hand, knowing it was more of a strain on her than upon himself.

"You see," summarized the lawyer, turning to Violet at the close, "the funds held in trust by us at the bank are to be placed to your account immediately, and the matter will be given attention early in the morning. With your share of

Doctor Sutton's estate and the amount you inherit under the normal clauses of your father's will, you are worth, at this moment, close to three-quarters of a million dollars. If you will permit us to advise you, Miss Bronson"—an apologetic cough—"since this fortune has been made in rubber we believe a portion of the cash at least should be reinvested in rubber interests—"

"What was that provision about the portrait of Steele?" interrupted Dupont.

"I was coming to that," stated the little man, with dignity. "There is a sealed codicil in our possession, and the main document hints that this disposes of an additional fortune of some magnitude. This codicil we are to open at any time, but only when Miss Bronson, in person, presents at our office, intact, the oil painting of Stuart Steele made by her mother and brought back to the United States by Doctor Sutton, together with the will and other papers of the deceased." He cleared his throat. "I believe that when the codicil is opened Miss Bronson will prove to be fabulously wealthy."

"Isn't it a rather strange provision?" queried Dupont.

"It is, but no more so than the fact that Stuart Steele or his children were made Bronson's heirs if Miss Violet failed to reach her eighteenth birthday, or that they are now made her heirs if she dies without children." The lawyer straightened

a bit, in his importance. "I happen to know the reason for that," he added.

"Tell us!" exclaimed Violet, quickly.

"Your father and Stuart Steele, when they became partners in their rubber ventures, knew that they faced great individual danger. They agreed that each should be the heir of the other, since none of their outside relatives shared in the tremendous hardships. They agreed that their children should not become heirs until coming of age, nor their grandchildren; they also agreed to prevent their descendants from disposing of any part of either fortune until the third generation."

Dupont leaned forward. "Steele is dead. Violet, then, should inherit his fortune also. He had not married."

The lawyer rose, taking his hat to leave. "That is very true," he admitted, patronizingly. "As executors of Miss Bronson's estate we would have acted, except that we have never been able to locate any property belonging to Steele. Then we have no proof he is not alive. If his estate is ever uncovered it will be necessary for a court to adjudge him dead."

When the man was out of the room Dupont turned to Violet with a smile. "You cannot think me a fortune hunter, dear," he grinned. "Unless we have children, and they grow up, your father's partner and his descendants will inherit your money. I'll never get it."

"You'll have all the use of it," she teased. "Besides, Steele is dead."

Miss Sutton, hurrying back into the room from the door, now revealed her excitement. "Was that the picture which was stolen when my brother was killed? Is that the painting they wanted so badly that they tortured him? You see"—she only paused for breath; the questions needing no answer in her mind—"you see, it's terribly important, and I know how you can get it back from them."

"How?" Dupont, serious, was dubious.

"Why, I know of the most wonderful new medium, and all my society friends are going to her, and just the other day she located a very valuable ring which Mrs. Denner-Dudley lost at the races and—she's marvelous!"

Dupont looked at Violet. She brightened

"Let's!" she said.

"I—I haven't so much use for these commercial clairvoyants—"

"But they can do things. Remember how you yourself discovered I was at that crumbling old church, and saved me. Besides"—there was a wistful softness which stole into her expression—"remember all my poor father suffered. Would it be fair to him to let the picture go, never to open that codicil of his will—"

"I'll go phone right away!" Aunt Julia, only so called by Violet as a child because she

was the sister of Doctor Sutton, bustled out eagerly.

Mesma, the psychic in question, still occupied the quarters in which she had eked out a living before she became a society fad. One rather large room served for her sittings; behind that was a smaller bedchamber. Narrow steamboat stairs led to the ground floor of the little building, once a stable, now a garage to the extent that the first floor was leased for the storage of two unused motor trucks. The alley, a private drive, made a sharp turn at fifty yards, then led straight to the street for the length of half a block. It was dimly lighted, unkept, paved with worn and loosened cobblestones.

Dupont, decidedly ill-impressed, noticed that Violet was nervous.

"Do you think we'd better give it up?" he asked.

Mesma had compromised her surroundings for the benefit of her wealthy patronage to the extent of the installation of electric lights and a telephone. Cheap Japanese lanterns covered the bulbs, however. Under foot the carpet gave softly, but with the crinkle testifying to straw padding beneath. While there were huge vases and ornaments placed about with an attempt to create an artistic effect, the whole was tawdry and garish and fraudulent.

Mesma herself was a mountain of fat, soft,

flabby, and ponderous. She trembled like a gelatin dessert as she moved. Her voice was vapid, weak; her eyes lack-lustrous, watery, and small. Dupont knew at a glance that she was the true medium type, that she would be honest to the extent of her powers—but of those he had his doubts.

"I'm right glad to see you both," she wheezed. Then she turned to Violet. "Sit down, dearie, at the table here, and let me have your hands. I feel right smart to-day and there are many spirit voices clamoring to give a message. I hear the heavenly music near you, my dear, and there is a bright light about you which tells me everything is going to come out all right if you keep a stiff upper lip and trust to your spirit guides and the impulses they give you."

She turned off the main lights, so that there was only the dim glow from an altar lamp behind her, a gleam of red which failed even to outline the figures at the table to Dupont, a single glowing eye in the darkness.

"I see an Indian chief!" Mesma exclaimed. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "And another! And another! You are surrounded by Indians, dearie. That is a splendid sign and you must remember these redmen friends of yours in your prayers at night."

Violet was impatient. "I've come to ask you about—"

"Sh!" Mesma's voice hovered on the hiss of the warning. "I see a 'D,' and another 'D.' Do you know anyone whose name begins with 'D?'"

"No! I—"

"Wait! It's coming clearer. It's—it's doc—it's doctor! I see the word 'doctor' written over your head in flaming letters. Doctor 'D!'"

"Not Doctor Sutton, my guardian?"

"No, it's—" A pause, then an element of doubtful elation. "It's a very peculiar name, but it's very clear. It's 'Doctor Daddy!'"

"That's it! That's wonderful!" Violet's voice was eager. "What does he say?"

"He says not to worry. He says he is very happy. He indicates that you will be very happy in a three. That's three days, or three weeks, or three months. It—it's quite far off. It may be months."

Violet was plainly disappointed. "Then—then he has nothing more to tell me?"

"Yes! He wants to tell you something about a—about a map! So you want to know anything about a map, or"—a pause—"it looks something like a portrait and something like a map. He holds it up for me to see. I can't quite make it out."

"Oh, Mesma!" Violet was pleading in her excitement. "That is perfectly wonderful. It is a portrait and I want to recover it. I want to know where it is."

Suddenly Dupont, sitting in the darkness, became aware of a new and disturbingly familiar mental influence. For several moments he could not place it in his memory; then he recognized the intruder. The Mystery Mind! What did this mean? Was Mesma one of the gang? All at once he realized that she was speaking again.

"There is a big black cloud rolling in over me, dearies, and over you. It is chill and cold. Can you feel me tremble? And I am getting frightened. Something in the back of my head is drawing together. I do not understand. Is there some great fear hovering over you? Now—now the Indians are hurrying away. They make signs to tell me to watch out, to be careful. They explain that they are powerless." In an instant stark terror came into the medium's voice. "Go 'way! Go 'way!" She lost the wheezing whisper. Her tones mounted until they were a shrill scream. "Go' way! Go' way!" She began beating on the table. Then with sudden cessation of the hysteria she fell forward on her arms. She began repeating the Lord's prayer, over and over to herself, in a mumbling undertone.

Dupont found the switch to the lights and threw them on. Violet looked about for water. In a moment, however, Mesma seemed to come to herself. She was chagrined and apologetic.

"I do not understand the influence that swept

in upon me, she told them. "And just as I was getting things for you, too!" She brightened. "I tell you what. Conditions are unfavorable now, but you come back! You come back right after supper. I have no appointment then."

In the alley, making their way in the gloom toward the street, Violet clung to Dupont's arm and both were silent. He was wondering again about this mysterious mental influence. If it penetrated to his trained scientific mind there was no wonder it terrified the medium. But did it mean that the gang were active once more? Was there any immediate menace which he should guard against?

Probably Violet's thoughts were similar to his own. Without warning she clutched him in trembling fear.

"Look!" she exclaimed, in an undertone. "The hunchback!"

Sure enough the little man was slinking along out of the alley ahead of them. Dupont caught a bit of her fright and for a moment both hesitated.

It was obvious, however, that Case was unaware of the presence of the couple behind him. Into Dupont's mind flashed an inspiration. If the gang again were to become active it was the part of wisdom to anticipate their moves. He once had followed the black, Kali, to a previous haunt. Perhaps Case would lead him to their new headquarters.

The Mystery Mind

Supreme Pictures, Inc. STARRING J. ROBERT PAULINE

"Are you afraid to go home alone?" he asked Violet. "Now?"

"No, but—" The little hand on his arm tightened.

"You are perfectly safe in this neighborhood, once we reach the street. That hunchback probably has been spying on us, and if I follow him it may give me a direct clue to our enemies."

In the darkness she kissed him bravely; then held back without another word.

Case made his way leisurely to a downtown surface car, transferring. There he took the elevated, and by a devious route, utilizing the street cars again, made his way to an outlying quarry in a borough across the river. By this time it was dark, so that Dupont could follow closely on foot. Never once did the hunchback look back, occupied apparently with thoughts of his own. Complete success attended the amateur shadowing of the hypnotist.

Overlooking the yawning hole of the quarry was a rough wooden shack. Case entered, lighting a watchman's lantern and settling to read an old newspaper by the light it afforded. For some time Dupont waited. Then, sure the hunchback was alone, remembering the information he had gained from him before, he entered boldly, unarmed, preparing to fix the little man's eyes; to plunge him into a hypnotic state.

Hardly had Dupont taken his position, hardly

had Case glanced up in amazed surprise, before a new voice sounded from behind the hypnotist.

"I hope you'll pardon me!" The tones, unmistakably male, were very polite. "I regret the necessity of this very much, but I must ask you to elevate your hands above your head."

XXII

THE SECOND SITTING

FOR more than an hour Violet waited for Dupont to return. Then she rose and with her newborn determination resolved to visit Mesma alone. The medium had promised to obtain results for her, and would be waiting. Dupont was doing his part, seeking to uncover the meeting place and perhaps the plans of her enemies. The recovery of the map was of even greater importance. Therefore she would proceed without him.

In her room, carefully concealed in the back of a drawer of lingerie, was the revolver Doctor Sutton had given her, still loaded. She hid this in her handbag so as to be prepared to defend herself in case of trouble. Stealing out of the house, she stopped in the drug store at the corner to phone the detective agency. With them she arranged for an operative who would meet her at the alley entrance to Mesma's quarters. These precautions taken, she felt secure to hasten to her second sitting.

The detective was a solid burly individual who

gave her a sense of confidence. As they hurried over the rough cobblestones in the dark she realized she would never have had the courage to approach the place alone. At the door, however, she felt at ease. The stairs were lighted and the smell of incense drifted down from above.

"You wait in the entrance here," she instructed her man. "Warn me if anyone steals up, or if you see anything suspicious. If you hear a cry from me you'll know I need you. Understand?"

He nodded. She had a vague inward feeling she should keep him directly at her side. She realized, however, that no stranger should hear of the theft of the portrait or of its immense value to her, nor could she tell what intimate things might come out in a séance. She rushed up the steps by herself, wondering if she were terribly late.

The room above was unlighted, save for the altar lamp. The smoke of the incense was heavy and bitter, causing her eyes to water, making her choke for just a moment.

"Can you find your way, dearie?" came the whisper from the medium's table. The voice was throaty and pitched lower, as if Mesma suffered still from the brief spell of hysteria a few hours earlier. "Here!" she whispered again, to guide Violet.

"I can put on the lights?" Violet suggested.

"No! No! All the spirit controls are here now. I have been working on your problem, my dear."

Violet, groping blindly, with eyes smarting yet,

found the chair she had occupied in the first sitting. She settled back with a gesture of relief, placing her hands on the cover for Mesma to grasp.

Nothing but a labored breathing came from the other side of the little table, mute indication of the nearness of the medium.

"Here are my hands!" Violet exclaimed, feeling about in front of her.

Now there was no answer. Very suddenly an all-pervading sweeping sense of menace came over her. She was in danger! But what was it? From what direction was she threatened? Downstairs was a detective to protect her. She had a revolver, ready to use, in her bag. Almost without thought she pushed backward and to one side. As she did so there was a sharp whizzing sound close to her ear. Her head was carried against the wood immediately behind her. While she felt no pain, she could not move. She raised a hand and found, vibrating still from the force of its impact, a sharp, short-handled knife. She was pinned to the partition, and had she not dodged just as she had, instinctively, she would have been killed.

But one person she knew threw knives! Even as the realization struck home to her the lights flashed on. There in the middle of the room, another knife in her slender hand, her lithe body poised for the cast, her mocking lips curved in a smile, stood Vera Collins. Mesma was not to be seen.

XXIII

A GRIM JOKE

DUPONT elevated his hands obediently. At the same time, remembering the success he had once had in hypnotizing Kali, so that the black, at his direction, attacked Renard, he attempted once more to catch the eyes of the hunchback. Case previously had succumbed to his will. Perhaps the stratagem would work again. He did not know who had him covered, except that from the voice it was not Renard. Rather than turning to see, he bent all his efforts to force the hunchback to meet his glance.

"Tie him up, Case!" came the order from behind.

Whether the little man remembered the power of Dupont's gaze, or whether his mind lacked the sensitiveness to respond to the hypnotist's telepathic commands, he failed to look up, but busied himself with a length of stout hemp rope, tying the prisoner.

That task completed by the hunchback, Dupont's captor revealed himself. Dressed in workingman's denim, with a battered felt hat, his shoes

and manicured nails yet betrayed the dandy. Slim, lazy of movement, humorous of expression, he smoked a huge-bowled pipe which gave him every appearance of a college boy in masquerade. There was a certain snap in his orders to Case. He still toyed with an automatic in his hand.

"Go down to the end of the car line," was his instruction to his associate. "Meet Renard and show him how to get up here in the dark without stumbling. I don't think he'd like a bath in the big hole."

"But, Mr. Noyes—" A very quick half side glance at Dupont revealed the hunchback's thought. The artist should be warned against the prisoner's hypnotic power.

Noyes gave him no opportunity. "Beat it!" he exclaimed. "Your legs are short and I suggest you do not keep him waiting. Besides"—a gesture of deprecation—"I wish to explain the ethics of this to our guest here. You see, Case, he might not appreciate the true nature of our hospitality, and that would never do."

The hunchback stormed out in disgust. Between these two members of the gang there was little love lost. As Case left, the other turned to Dupont, settling in a chair facing him, looking up unsuspiciously with cold but wide and light-blue eyes.

"It's this way Mr. Dupont," he began, evidently intending to while away the time with conver-

sation. "I doubt that my mother ever dreamed I would engage in enterprises of this sort, yet there is a certain fascination in extralegal pursuits which, to a gentleman of my cavalier tendencies, are distinctly intriguing."

Dupont, his face a mask, had the glance of his jailer fixed, yet Noyes was not an easy subject. He must be humored, kept talking, so that his suspicions would not be aroused.

"I see no fascination in ordinary thuggery, such as this," Dupont suggested.

"Ordinary thuggery!" repeated the artist. "Now you have us wrong. To me it was high art when Case lured you out here as neatly as he did. Renard thought of that. And you, no doubt, believed you were very clever in following the little man. You see, it is intriguing because we have to accomplish all these things with the law against us."

Dupont nearly forgot to hold the eyes of the other. For an instant his mind almost slipped away from its purpose. "I was lured here deliberately?" he asked, aghast.

"Most certainly!" Noyes chuckled. He polished the nails of one hand in the palm of the other. He tried to look down, but in his joy of worrying his prisoner he failed to realize that he was slipping, slowly, into a hypnotic state; that he could not move his eyes if he wished. "It would never do to have you at hand to protect

that very charming Miss Bronson, you know. It is her company which our chief desires most earnestly. Now that the provisions of her father's will are known to us definitely—"

"What are you going to do with her?" There was a hiss in Dupont's voice which should have been a warning to the artist, but now the mind of the hypnotist was supreme. With the spur of the thought of Violet's danger the will of Dupont was almost omnipotent. "What are you going to do with her?"

"My dear Dupont"—Noyes's head began to nod. He was succumbing fast—"there is a resort near here—the Portola on Jamaica Bay—run by a man they call the Strangler—"

"Noyes!" Dupont's command was sharp, crisp. "Untie me, quickly!"

The artist, moving like an automaton, obeyed; then he dropped back into the chair a lifeless, breathing form. The hypnotist trussed him speedily. Glancing about, spying an empty barrel, Dupont lifted and deposited him therein with a certain grim promptness. It was the work of an additional moment only to find and force down the cover with a blunt ax hanging upon the wall, after which the man who had been a prisoner two minutes before rushed over to the door with elation, free. Noyes was hidden effectually, and would not be injured, since the barrel contained crevices sufficient to admit the

air. When Case and Renard arrived they would waste valuable time in the search for the artist.

But in the door Dupont checked himself just in time, darting back into the shelter of the shack. The two other gangsters were immediately upon him, Case in the lead. It was too late! Unarmed, he would be unable to elude them even in the darkness. He was not sure they had not seen him.

The hunchback entered. In desperation Dupont faced him.

"Case!" he commanded, in a hoarse whisper. He knew it was occasionally possible, after a first time, to bring a subject under control almost instantaneously. "Case! I am Noyes, and not Dupont! You recognize me as Noyes! Quick! I am Noyes! I am Noyes!"

Smiling, the hunchback came toward him. A scowl succeeded the smile. "A fine job you wished on me, Mr. Noyes," he complained. "I'm —I'm all out of breath."

With his heart beating wildly in his excitement, Dupont turned to the door again. Renard had been under his control. Was it conceivable—

Renard entered. It was barely a moment after the entrance of Case. Dupont, summoning all his power, caught the eye of the fox. Upon that man's face came first an expression of amazement, then a slow comprehension not speedy enough to save him.

"I am Noyes," Dupont repeated, boring into the glance of Renard. "I am Noyes!" He did not dare make the assertion audibly, because of Case, who already believed him to be the artist. "You recognize me as Noyes!"

"Where's the prisoner, Noyes?" asked Renard, suddenly.

The battle was won. Dupont indicated the barrel.

Renard stalked over, hefted it, and examined the cover. After a moment he turned to the other two with a spreading sardonic grin which sent chills up and down the spine of the hypnotist. "Just the thing!" he muttered. "We'll give him a roll. Come on, you two!"

Dupont dared not intervene to save the life of the artist. He had cast two men into the spell of an unusual hallucination. The safety of Violet and himself would not permit him to attempt anything which might break it.

In the eagerness of the others he did not have to assist, actually, in getting the barrel out of the door. He watched as they started it, as it rolled down the steep incline, as it plunged out and fell, with a fearful, horrible, distant splash, in the water of the quarry far below. When they broke into loud exulting laughter he stole away, his blood cold. As soon as it was safe he ran. He arrived at the end of the surface line just in time to grasp the rail of a car starting cityward.

CHAPTER XXIV

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN

VIOLET screamed. Her only hope was to call the detective to her assistance before Vera could cast the knife. Into Vera's face came an expression of amusement which yet failed to cover the hate beneath.

"Yell your head off!" she exclaimed, unconcerned.

From below came a strange momentary scuffling sound, as of a struggle cut short. An instant later it was followed by the frightened exclamation of a man. A cry died in his throat, a single gurgle. Another brief rustling indicated a conflict of some sort. In less than a minute some heavy object dropped, with a faint thud; then silence reigned.

Again Violet screamed.

Vera poised the knife in her hand once more. "Stop it," she muttered. "Try to die like a—like an amazon."

Suddenly there flashed into Violet's mind all the terrors she had suffered at the hands of these mysterious enemies. Clear and sharp there ap-

peared to her the tortured feet of her guardian, which she had seen in spite of the protests of Dupont. And she remembered the hardships her father had suffered, and her own recent new-born determination to carry out his wishes at whatever cost, so as to prevent the fruits of his suffering going to any but those to whom he had wished them to go.

Probably she would meet her death in the space of the throw of a knife. Yet with the lightning speed of thought she lost her fear of Vera Collins. She reached up by her head swiftly. With strength she had never possessed she drew the blade pinning her to the wall, grasping it in her hand. As Vera threw the other she dodged as confidently and easily as though no danger beset her. Then, knife in hand, she advanced upon her enemy.

For a moment Vera gazed at her helplessly, in sheer amazement at the change in the girl. Violet, transformed into a veritable amazon, raised her weapon to strike. Just in time Vera woke to action, disarming her by a trick, an abrupt blow at the wrist. Infuriated, Violet attacked with bare hands. Together they fell to the floor. Vera, perhaps for the first time in her career, felt a lack of confidence in herself. Violet, filled with her sense of outrage, was more than a match for the other woman's strength. Both descended to the primitive in their struggle, biting, tearing,

kicking, scratching, rolling back and forth, pulling the clothes from each other, getting their hair entangled, snarling and grunting like animals. For four or five minutes the conflict continued. All at once Violet got both hands about the head and body of Vera. With all her might she raised her enemy some eight inches off the floor. Gasping, she plunged her against the marble base of one of Mesma's impossible ornaments.

Vera lay still. Violet, sobbing under the strain now, rushed about the quarters and found Mesma trussed up beneath the bed of her little sleeping chamber. Releasing her, she hurried to the telephone. This she found was dead, the wires cut.

"I'll—I'll go for the police!" she gasped, to the medium.

Downstairs, feeling her way hysterically through the gloom, she stumbled over the form of a man. Stooping, she recognized him in the dim reflected glow from above. It was the detective, dead. On his throat were the indentations of the fingers which had throttled him.

In horror she rose. Suddenly all the strength which had come to her slipped away. Her muscles softened, her limbs started to collapse beneath her. Even her great sense of purpose weakened. At that moment strong arms seized her and she felt herself drawn against the rough ill-smelling coat of a man who seemed hugely powerful to her now.

"That 'll do for you!" he exclaimed. Then he raised his voice. "Hey, Vera!"

From upstairs came a shrill scream. Mesma! Perhaps a minute later Violet heard steps, rather unsteady, on the stairs. She felt, intuitively, the slinking approach of her enemy. She knew the soft tones of the whisper addressed to her captor.

"Have you got her, Strangler?"

CHAPTER XXV

UNDER COVER OF REVELRY

DUPONT dropped off the street car at the first drug store, rushing to the telephone. Aunt Julia answered, explaining that Violet had gone to see Mesma without him and that she had not returned. To reassure the old lady he invented some quick explanation, ringing off and calling Mesma's number immediately. After several various unsatisfactory reports from the busy operator he obtained the exchange manager, learning that the phone was out of order.

His worst fears might be confirmed. He could not tell what had happened. To be safe he phoned the detective agency, directing that two men be sent to Mesma's place; that as many men as could be spared at once be dispatched to meet him at the Portola, a resort of which he had not heard before, but one familiar to the manager at the agency.

In a tiny store he outfitted himself completely with cheap clothing, even to shoes and hat; this to serve as a measure of protective disguise. Making his change as quickly as possible, bun-

dling his own things to await his call, he hurried then to Kelso Beach, the nearest point to the Portola. Two operatives were waiting for him on the railroad platform. The three might have passed anywhere as a group of young mechanics or workmen out for an evening's hilarity. Together they made their way to the dance resort.

The Portola was a huge rambling pavilion built over the waters of Jamaica Bay on one of the hundreds of tiny islands between Brooklyn and Rockaway. It was reached by a long wooden pier leading between rows of low summer cottages and roughly paralleling a shallow rowboat channel. In the days before the electric railroad across the bay, when Kelso Beach was reached by stagecoach, the Portola had been an exclusive beer garden known and patronized by a certain select few. Now there was still a trace of its magnificent appointments. The place itself had degenerated, however, to a resort of bootleggers.

Dupont knew no more than that Noyes had mentioned "Portola" and "the Strangler." Inside the large hall was a heterogeneous gathering at the various tables arranged around the dance floor. One of his men immediately demanded liquor of the waiter, to allay suspicion rather than otherwise.

"Tim Carter said we could get all we wanted by mentioning his name," stated the detective, inventing any name to serve the purpose.

"Tim?" rejoined the waiter, pretending to know the mythical person of influence. "Sure! What 'll it be, gents?"

The other detective stole out to use the telephone and to reconnoiter. In a very short while he returned, rather serious. "It's bad, I guess," he whispered to Dupont. "Bill and Joe got right down to that medium, Mesma's, joint and found her stuck. Dead as a door nail and the room a wreck. There was every indication of a struggle downstairs, too; blood, and the scratches of feet on the cement near one of the trucks, but no sign of our man nor of Miss Bronson. I said to send Bill and Joe out here."

"What's the lay out here, Jake?" queried the first operative.

"This is a bad neck of the woods. There's water on three sides of the building and under most of it. Back on the Rockaway side are a lot of private rooms and it's all marsh off there—the devil himself couldn't get up in a boat to look in the windows."

"Who is the Strangler?" asked Dupont. His eyes were roving to this, that, and every corner of the room, seeking a glimpse of Violet or of some member of the gang he knew.

"The Strangler? That's the boss here. Malachi Duggan's his name. Once he was a gunman over in South Brooklyn; before that he was a sailor,

I think. When he's mad he uses sea lingo, anyhow, and he's hands big enough to choke an ox, and a bad eye—I'd hate to cross him without a gat in my pocket."

"You know him?"

"I hung around here for weeks on a case once. I was Jake Spengler, a shipwright canned for getting drunk on the job, and sore at the world. You see there's a strong sweep of tide right under this old shack. The point they call Kelso Beach projects way into the bay. When the tide goes out over at Rockaway there's a devilish strong current held close to the shore here by the spread of marsh, and lasting a couple of hours or more. About that time several bodies were found out in the sea. It looked like they came from the bay with the tide. We had a hunch they might have come from here."

"How's that?" Dupont began to grasp at a possible motive in bringing Violet to this place. Her body cast into the water just before the ebb of the tide—

"Why, they all were strangled," Jake explained. "No one knows just why they call Duggan the 'Strangler,' but there must be a reason." He shrugged his shoulders.

Dupont felt his apprehension increasing to a point where it was almost impossible to sit still. Why should he have to wait until some move of the gang betrayed their purpose, or gave a hint

to the whereabouts of Violet? The girl he loved was in danger, perhaps desperate danger—

"Sh!" warned the first detective.

Approaching the table was a woman in her early thirties, evidently, from her garb, one of the entertainers. Now a little heavy, perhaps, with her dress cut far too low at the neck and her features much too frankly rouged, she yet gave proof of an earlier beauty; there was even in her movements the trace of a gracefulness surviving dissipation. She went straight to the second operative, putting a hand on his shoulder familiarly.

"'Lo, Jake!" she exclaimed. "When d'ya get back?"

"Yesterday!" The detective hooked up a chair with his toe. "Sit down, Lil. Meet my friends, Sam Fuller, worked with me at Hog Island, riveter, and Herman Fuller, his cousin. This is Lil, boys."

The waiter came up with their drinks. The woman turned to him at once.

"Give these people anything they want," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am, I have. They said—they said"—his face went suddenly blank—"anyhow, somebody said it was all right."

From the center of the dance floor the jazz band intruded upon the relative silence of the casino with a fearful din. There were five pieces ensconced upon a raised platform decorated with

American and Irish flags. Electric lights in the drum and banjo impressed upon the spectator the importance of those instruments. The saxophone and cornet players seemed locked in a contest of life-and-death magnitude.

Immediately tables were deserted. Jake hastened to sweep Lil into the mélêe of dancers. The other detective leaned over to Dupont.

"Jake 'll get a lot of dope from her. She's known as the 'Gun Moll,' and has been the Strangler's girl for years; was a member of that Brooklyn gang when he was. Jake got all she knew when he was hanging around here before."

Unable to curb his impatience longer, Dupont rose. "I'll just look around a bit," he explained. "I'll come back right away."

As near as he could see, the Portola was like any one of a hundred shore resorts. While looking about in every direction for a sign of Violet or some member of the gang, vainly, he studied those upon the dance floor and at the tables. The men, boys mostly, were of the working classes, many coatless and collarless, without even clean shirts. The girls were from the shops, apparently, aping in their cheap dresses the styles of Fifth Avenue, in a way making the most of whatever plump and rounded freshness they possessed, yet invariably affecting the layer upon layer of powder which to Dupont was the unmistakable earmark of their calling.

On two sides of the casino were the marshes of Jamaica Bay. Toward the clear water was a row of bathhouses, from a dozen to fifteen, but closed, falling to pieces, and covered with dirt and cobwebs. Near by was the bar and pantry and kitchen; also a corridor leading to the private rooms. Investigating as far as he dared, he detected nothing suspicious. Then the music stopped. He hurried back toward his table.

The two detectives were alone. Jake leaned forward eagerly.

"She's sore on the Strangler!" he exclaimed. "Back in the private rooms there's another woman, a beauty; been hiding here for weeks, and the Strangler getting sweet on her. Now this new dame and the Strangler went in to Brooklyn this afternoon together and they've come back, bringing another skirt with them. It's Miss Bronson, no question of it, because the Gun Moll described her to me. The Strangler's raving about her, and the Gun Moll's going to make trouble, big trouble, just as soon as the music stops and the crowd gets away."

"Then—" Suddenly Dupont rose. Violet was here! She was in danger! She was in the hands of this notorious gangster—

His companions pulled him to his seat, cautioning him.

"I'm fixing it with the Gun Moll," protested Jake, earnestly. "We can't do anything now.

There 're only three of us and the Strangler always has a dozen or so of his henchmen hanging around here. But I told Lil that—well, I strung her along a bit and told her you two were my friends and would stick with me and that we'd get rid of both dames for her. It 'll be full tide by midnight and there's a boat back of the bathhouses—"

Dupont bit his lips until they bled. His reason told him that the plan of the detective was the most sensible and most feasible way to rescue Violet. Yet it seemed impossible to wait. Several times he started to urge that the police be called at once. He knew that in case of a spectacular raid Vera and Violet would probably escape by boat, that in the vast spread of the bay with its concealing marshes pursuit would be fruitless, especially on a night without the moon. Nevertheless, anything seemed better than inaction. Only by the greatest effort of will could he control himself.

When the music struck up again he rose to stroll about, ignoring the protests of the detectives. His steps, almost in spite of him, took him back into the corridor leading past the private rooms. Alone, unmolested, he listened at the door of each. Though something warned him of danger hovering close, he yielded to the fascination of the near presence of Violet. It was not only his belief that she was here; he knew it.

Suddenly there was a muffled scream. Without thought he opened the door to the room from which he believed it to come, dashing in foolhardily. Once inside, he glanced about in haste to discover that the room was bare, completely unfurnished, and that there was no one in it. At the same instant the scream came again, through the thin board partition. It was the adjoining room. He turned. As he did so the door slammed shut, gently. It was a heavy door, on a spring lock. There was no inside knob. He was a prisoner, thanks to his own precipitousness.

While he pondered, frantically, upon what to do next, the scream came a third time. Now he was sure—with sudden crushing realization—that it was not Violet, but some other woman. Waking to action, determined to get himself out of this situation, he went to the door prepared to apply his weight, quietly if possible, but with sufficient force to break out. As he did so he heard approaching steps and the muffled shriek once more; then some one seized the knob of the door, opening it abruptly and angrily.

"In with you! In with you in a hurry!"

Dupont drew back. Stumbling into the room, falling to knees and elbows and unable to catch herself because her hands were tied, was Vera Collins. A gag in her mouth accounted for the muffling of her screams. In her eyes was a great

wide fright. Her face was as white as the handkerchief wedged between her jaws.

Following her was the Gun Moll. In the face and attitude of the larger woman a black consuming jealousy had reached the point of desperation. She did not notice Dupont; she had no eyes for anything but Vera, no attention for anything but her own grim purpose. Striding past the girl, still on knees and elbows, the Gun Moll lifted a huge trap door, allowing it to fall back to the floor with a bang.

"Will you jump," she muttered, "or shall I push you?"

Dupont started to steal out the door, taking advantage of his opportunity. He had waited too long. Without looking at him, without being aware of his presence except to push him back into the room, a man of huge bulk, very evidently the Strangler himself, strode in.

"What's this, Lil? What's the big idea?"

The Gun Moll drew back in abject fear. In a moment the Strangler understood. First he stooped, taking a penknife, cutting the ropes which bound Vera. Then without a word he advanced upon the woman who for years had been his companion. With no expression but a sort of brutish grim amusement in his face, he slipped his fingers to her throat, watching her as he increased the pressure gradually.

Vera fled. She did not notice Dupont. He

stole to the door after her, pausing to see if the way was clear. Just outside stood a man nearly as large as the Strangler. This henchman of the gangster, grinning, saw Dupont and collared him. Dupont was helpless in his grasp, though he struggled desperately.

Held finally so he could not move, he witnessed the throttling of the Gun Moll. He saw the Strangler, without a shade of compunction, fling her lifeless body through the hole in the floor. He heard a splash. Then he realized that the gangster was looking at him for the first time.

"This guy saw it," murmured the henchman, explaining.

"Oh!" The Strangler's hands started for the throat of Dupont.

"That 'll make two bodies the same night," remarked the other gangster.

"Right!" The Strangler's voice was throaty. "Gimme a rope and bring that new skirt in here."

Dupont, utterly helpless in the hands of these men, was tied hand and foot and left, trussed, in the corner. It was sheer perversity of fate that he was unable to catch the glance of either and so bring his power to bear. At the same time his two paid detectives sat outside in the casino, without any idea of his plight. Strains of music came from the dance floor. Under cover of the revelry one murder had been committed. He could have no idea of what might follow.

The Strangler waited. Not once did he turn his eyes toward Dupont. After some little time Violet was brought in. Then he rose.

"Now, little girl," the gangster began, "you want to listen to me. You see that hole there?"

Violet nodded. She was so placed that she could not see Dupont. He grasped, however, that she was different. There was a sort of fearlessness about her now. In her fight with Vera she had found a new side to her character. She had discovered the primitive woman within herself. She might face peril, she might sense apprehension, she might know weakness of body or fatigue of mind. But fear she had lost forever.

The Strangler watched her. "Down there in the water is a woman who crossed me," he told her. "Now I'm good to those who do as I want 'em. See? I'm supposed to put you where I put Lil a few moments ago, but"—with a leer he moved over, as though to slip his arms about her—"you're too young and too pretty to snuff out," he remarked. "What do you say?"

"This!" Summoning her strength, she slapped his face smartly.

In an instant he started for her. She ran around to the other side of the open trap. There they faced each other. Dupont strained at his bonds, beads of perspiration on his face. If only he could spring to her assistance!

"I'll give you one more chance!" the Strangler muttered. "You're a spunky—"

"If you come one step nearer to me," she exclaimed, eyes blazing into his fearlessly, "I'll jump down there of my own accord!"

Laughing, he strode around the hole. Without a moment's hesitation she leaped as she had threatened. Dupont, in silent agony of effort, heard the splash.

XXVI

THE MYSTERY OF THE MAP

VIOLET felt herself sink deep in the waters of Jamaica Bay. She knew she would be swept out from under the old pavilion, toward the open ocean. For the moment she did not care. Anything, even death, was preferable to the fate offered by the man who had carried her from the quarters of Mesma, the medium, to this resort; who seemingly was the newest associate of Vera, the most recent acquisition of the gang.

But as her feet struck the soft loam of the bottom she realized she had a chance for escape. After all, she had eluded her captor. She could swim and it was unlikely he would follow; that he would be prepared to strike out after her in the darkness. With renewed determination she straightened as she shot upward again, directing her course. Reaching the surface, she held herself low in the water, kicking off her slippers and paddling softly away from the lighted structure of the dance pavilion.

The night was warm and the embrace of the bay soothing to the tired muscles and worn nerves

of the girl. Already the tide had turned and she felt the slight receding movement away from the shore. By a few strokes now and then she found she could keep herself in the channel and out of the grass; more, the effort was so slight that she realized no hampering effort from her skirts, she saw no necessity for discarding anything but her slippers, already sacrificed.

From the casino, now some distance away, there came a sudden burst of music as the band struck up. Echoing across the water, there was a strange change in the effect of the melody. The strident tones of the jazz instruments failed to carry. The whole was softened. The low pitched supporting notes were augmented and made prominent until there was something Oriental, fascinating, about the air.

In the distance she caught the lights of Rockaway. Behind her and beyond the outlined Portola was Canarsie, the sheen of its illumination coming to her over a bit of the bay quite free from weeds. In the far distance was a glow. That she knew was Coney Island, cut off by the flatlands of Brooklyn.

As she began to chill she realized she must wake to definite action. Canarsie seemed an easy goal, but not against the tide. Rather it would be better to attempt to swim enough to make the Brooklyn shore before she was carried out to sea. Conserving her strength, now arranging her skirts

so as to free her movements, she struck out with an easy and moderately powerful stroke.

For perhaps twenty minutes she kept ahead, knowing she was good for at least an hour of consistent effort. But now, all at once, silhouetted between the lights of Canarsie and herself, as she glanced back she detected an unusually large row-boat containing two men. It was fairly close to her. It seemed headed for one of the islands lying out in the bay from Kelso Beach, and so had no probable connection with the Portola or her enemies.

"Boat ahoy!" she called, raising herself in the water.

"Haloo!" came the answer.

"This way! Help!" she cried.

Approaching slowly in the darkness, they found her finally. Strong arms helped her aboard. Then one of the men lighted a lantern so they could see her. As the rays fell on his face she started back, utterly aghast. It was Case, the hunchback.

"Well, what do you know!" came the ejaculation behind her. "It's a small world, after all."

She turned. Renard!

There was a stir at her feet. A figure she had not noticed, huddled up on some tarpaulins and covered with a cloak, stirred and rose. It was a girl, and there was no mistaking her hard little laugh. Vera Collins!

"What did the Strangler try to do with you?" demanded Vera. "Did he get fresh?"

Violet's first impulse was to refuse to answer. But somehow she detected a subtle difference in the attitude of these others; as if they intended no ill will, for the present at least. She decided not to antagonize them needlessly.

"He told me I had to become his—his girl," she said.

"See!" Vera was triumphant. "I told Evil Eye that we couldn't trust the Strangler; that he would play his own ends."

"What did he do?" asked Renard, of Violet.

"He said if I wouldn't he would choke me to death and throw me into the water. I told him I would jump into the water of my own accord first, and I did."

"Well, we're lucky," admitted Renard, turning to Vera. "It would have been bad enough for the Strangler to have killed her after Evil Eye saying she must be brought to him alive, but it would have been worse to have her escape." He faced Violet. "Will you sit quiet if we don't tie you?" he asked. "It's a long trip," he added.

"I—I guess so." She was disheartened now as she began to realize the real nature of her predicament.

Both Case and Renard were at the oars. As they took them up again she noticed they were weaving in and out upon the breast of the main current of the receding tide; that they were headed generally in the direction of the Sound.

It was this course which had led her to believe them from the islands beyond Kelso Beach. Also she saw that they extinguished the lantern and she wondered at their purpose.

"It might be behind us," suggested Vera, sitting up now and taking an interest. "She was swimming. It was only floating."

"You didn't swim very fast, did you?" queried Renard, turning to Violet and resting on his oars. "You just paddled, didn't you?"

"I didn't use much effort," she confessed, sulkily, to conceal her curiosity. What was floating?

"As for me"—this was the first word from Case, in an ill-humored wheeze—"I don't see the sense in trying to find a stiff somewheres out on miles and miles of water at night."

"I know this channel like a book, Case," protested Renard. "It 'll be carried right out to sea, as all the others were, and the water runs along here in a space not over eight feet wide, and it's no harder than following a river on land."

"Suppose it don't float? What then?"

"Then we're not in luck. Then we have nothing on our friend the Strangler."

As Renard spoke there was a slight bump. They had struck some obstacle. A moment later a cry of exultation from Case warned Violet that they had found the object for which they searched. When they started to haul it aboard she under-

stood. It was the body of the Gun Moll! That was what they meant by getting something "on" the Strangler. That was the reason of this midnight search. That was why they happened upon her, in the tidal current sweeping away from the pavilion at the Portola.

As the grim, sodden thing was deposited in the bottom of the boat a loose, clammy hand fell over and upon her stockinged foot. At its touch the horror and gruesomeness of the whole night swept into her consciousness with keen, fresh realization. She felt a nausea steal her control of her faculties. Mixed with it was unreasoning rebellion. She rose, suddenly. With a cry she plunged over the rail again, mouth open, eyes wide, into the waters of Jamaica Bay once more.

She awoke to find herself lying on a bed, her clothes still wet, an intense fatigue evident all over her body. She tried to rise, only to discover she was so dizzy that everything in the room swam before her eyes. That, she guessed, was the result of all the water she had swallowed. Feeling her clothes, she decided it could not be more than an hour—two hours at the most, since her experience out upon the surface of the bay.

Unquestionably she was in the hands of her enemies. Turning her head, she saw beside her, knitting silently, the hatchet-faced woman she had learned was Lydia, the wife of Case, the hunchback.

"What time is it?" she asked.

The woman paid no attention. Was she instructed to answer no questions? For a while Violet tossed about, gradually recovering from the effects of her double plunge, slowly sensing a return of her determination to escape from these people, to outwit them, to recover the map. She wondered if Dupont had met with success. She tried to think that her aunt Julia would not be worried at her non-appearance.

The walls of the room were rough boards, decorated with a few articles of fishing tackle. The light was an oil lamp; the blanket on which she lay of the coarsest weave; the bed hard and unyielding. This must be some fisher shack, not so far away from the bay.

Interrupting her reflections, startling her, the shrouded figure of Evil Eye came into the room.

"Are you able to get up?" he asked, in his sepulchral voice.

She nodded, following him through a winding hall which smelled of fish, into another chamber hung entirely in black and furnished with some degree of comfort. The lamp was an oil burner, but of a patent type. Here there was a stove, with a bin of fuel and a tray filled with ashes, testifying to its use in chilly weather.

Before Evil Eye was spread an unframed canvas portrait, its farther corners weighted respectively by an inkwell and a box of fishhooks. At

the sight of the picture she started, barely checking an exclamation. It was the painting of Stuart Steele, which she had set herself to recover.

Evil Eye did not reveal his features. Apparently he did not wish to frighten her if he could obtain his information otherwise.

"This," he said, indicating the canvas, "is in some way a map to the treasure of the Devil God. Explain it to me."

She shook her head. "I know nothing about it," she asserted.

He leaned over. Absently he blew some fine dust from its surface. "You shall have to tell us," he said. "You shall be tortured until you do tell or until you bring some one to us who can tell."

"I know nothing about it," she repeated, desperately.

To her surprise he conducted her back to her room without violence. There was no mistaking the severity of his instructions to Lydia, however, given in some language Violet did not understand.

For hours—for long interminable hours, it seemed—she tossed about upon the uncomfortable blanket. Her clothes gradually dried, but they were sticky with the salt and clung to her. The picture of the canvas spread out upon the table before Evil Eye fascinated her. She could not drive it from her mind. If only she knew where it was hidden—

An incident of almost trivial nature came back to mind. Evil Eye had blown a very fine dust from its face. Now she recognized it. Ash! She remembered the stove in the room and its tray, choked to the grate above. What a splendid hiding place! She was suddenly very sure that the precious portrait was hidden in the ashes in that other room.

She glanced at Lydia. Elated, she found the woman had dropped off asleep. Without waiting for second thought she stole from the bed and out into the hall. The door to the farther chamber was half open, the room dark. Hardly daring to strike a light, she felt her way to the stove, clutched in beneath the grate with her hand, eagerly. In an instant her fingers closed on a roll of canvas. There was little doubt of it. The painting of Steele was in her possession.

She did not return to the first room, but turned off into another hall. A very faint light through the cracks here seemed to come from outside. She opened a door, ever so cautiously, and found herself on a tiny dock in front of the shack. In the east was the very first purple of dawn. It was just enough to reveal before her the glistening bay. Immediately at her feet was a small boat with oars in place, a lighter and more manageable craft than the heavy one which had brought her here a prisoner.

Luck had been with her at every turn. She

pushed the little boat into the water without a sound. The canvas she rerolled and placed between her knees. Taking the oars, she stole off, silently, in the direction of Canarsie. There she could take the Elevated. A single transfer would carry her near to Washington Square. This early in the morning her lack of shoes and hat, the torn and bedraggled condition of her clothes, would not attract too great attention.

For half to three quarters of an hour nothing happened to dampen her hopes. Then just as the purple in the east turned rose, just as she reached a point in the center of the open bay, a heavy fog rolled in off the ocean almost without warning.

In an instant the light faded, shut out by the moisture in the air. The fog penetrated her clothes, chilling her to the marrow. First she lost her sense of direction. Then, as she became panic stricken, she lost an oar and was helpless indeed. Her next realization was that the little craft had been caught by the incoming tide; that it was being swept along in a well-defined current of water.

Discouraged, in despair, she dropped to the bottom of the boat, sobbing silently to herself. Imperceptibly the rising daylight penetrated the fog, but not so she could see even the blunted prow immediately before her. She knew she was drifting. Then came the thought that she might be carried back to the Portola. Renard had sug-

gested something about a regular course of the current. Frightened at that, she took the one oar, attempting to use it as a pole. It stuck in the mud at once, nearly pulling her into the water. Once more she bowed her head, paying no attention to anything until with a sharp lurch the boat struck some obstacle and stuck.

She looked up. Above her was a square of dim light, a perfectly inconceivable thing until she realized the situation. As she had feared, she had been carried back to the Portola by the return of the tide. She was under the building.

The craft in which she clung trembling to the canvas for which she had risked so much, had stuck directly beneath the trap of the room where the Strangler had threatened her.

She laughed hysterically. Then she controlled herself. Rising cautiously, she peered above the trap, standing on the seat of the boat. At what she saw she laughed again, believing it a hallucination, a fancy of a mind suddenly disordered. For several moments she could not credit the reality of the scene before her. Finally she lowered her voice, calling very softly:

"Robert!"

He opened his eyes. He still sat, trussed, in the corner where before she had failed to see him. He looked at her in a disbelief equal to her own.

Grasping the floor, she pulled herself up and in by a superhuman effort. Clutched beneath her

knees was the precious painting. From Dupont's own pocket she took the knife to cut his bonds. With tender firmness she chafed his wrists to restore the circulation. Giggling happily now, she showed him the portrait. All at once he woke to action.

"Quick! I heard them moving about inside just a moment ago."

"The boat!" she exclaimed.

He lowered himself first, so as to help her down. She leaned down, to hand him the map. As he took it he lost his balance, just for a moment. Balancing himself, he rocked the frail craft beneath him. Without warning its nose slipped from the pile against which it had drifted, which had held it. It swung around in the rising water, away from the trap.

"Robert," she called. "Careful! Quick!"

He dropped down, placing the canvas in the bottom of the boat safely, grasping for the oars. There were none. While he drifted out of sight in the fog, too far away from the post to grasp it with his hands, without any means of propelling the boat back again beneath the trap, Violet heard the door in the room behind her open, heard voices only too familiar.

"Well, well! Look who's here!"

She glanced up hopelessly. Renard had spoken. He was grinning. Behind him was Case and the Strangler and Evil Eye.

XXVII

BARRICADED

SEVERAL valuable moments passed before Dupont realized there were no oars in the boat. Once he understood the situation, he straightened abruptly with the idea of grasping the post, thus holding the little craft until Violet could drop from the room above. But by this time the drift had carried him just a little more than an arm's reach away. Stretching his hands overhead, he found he could barely reach the under side of the flooring with the tips of his fingers. While he groped frantically for the beams he was swept farther and farther along by the incoming tide. The square patch of dim light long since had been swallowed up in the fog. When finally he obtained a secure hold upon a sloping timber, which apparently was a brace under the casino itself, he had no idea of direction whatever.

He thought of calling to her, obtaining guidance in that way. He wondered if it would be safe to cry out, if he could depend upon the direction of

sound in a heavy fog. While he hesitated there came a crashing slam which reverberated beneath the old structure, echoing and re-echoing. For an instant he crouched, frightened; then he understood. Some one had closed the big trap in the floor. He shuddered, because it meant the possible capture of Violet again. Unless she had left the room she had been caught. She never could have lifted the heavy trap herself.

A sudden, unexpected swell of the rising water caught him unawares and broke his hold, so that he stumbled and nearly fell from the boat. As it bobbed along again on the drift he felt instinctively that he was being carried from beneath the building. He reached out on either side and above, but failed to touch wood or anything solid. Dropping down, plunging his arms in the water to his elbows, he attempted to paddle his way back, but soon found he could make no progress against the current.

Day was breaking rapidly. A fine, diffused light, through the fog, seemed to be coming from all directions, so he could not yet form any idea of his location. The only consoling thought was that, after all, he was drifting away from the Portola, that he had the portrait in his possession.

All at once, with startling abruptness, a boat loomed up out of the mist ahead, pointed directly for his craft. Before he could cry out they struck. He saw, in sort of ghostly outline, the figures of

four men in the second little vessel. Instantly a voice rang out.

"Up with your hands! I've got you covered. Utter a sound and I shoot!"

One of the others leaned forward. He saw Dupont's face as Dupont recognized his.

"Hell!" exclaimed this man. "it's Mr. Dupont himself!"

They were his detectives: Jake, and Jake's partner, introduced to the Gun Moll as Sam, and Bill and Joe, the two operatives who had hurried out from Mesma's quarters after their failure there to find Violet.

"We were going to raid the private rooms one at a time," explained Jake. "We had to wait because the Strangler was running around like a wild man nearly all night. Then the fog came up to make it easy. We planned to lift a man up at each window."

"Miss Bronson is still in their hands," explained Dupont, eagerly. "It's the third room back. I just left her." He told of drifting away because he had no oars; of hearing the trap slam. "If they've caught her they have hardly had enough time to get her away," he added.

"If you heard the trap slam—" began Jake.

"Sh-h!" interrupted one of the other detectives.

Echoing through the fog, sounding clearly over the smooth surface of the bay in the stillness of early morning, was a woman's muffled scream.

A moment later there was a splash, a thrashing in the water. Then there came, after perhaps a minute of silence, the regular sound of oars in their locks. A second scream, cut short, was unquestionably from the throat of Violet.

Dupont leaped into the boat with the detectives. "Follow them," he gasped, hoarsely. "They'll lead us to their hang-out."

Jake and Sam bent to the oars willingly. After fifteen minutes Bill and Joe took a turn. Dupont relieved Sam and rowed with Jake. At short periods they stopped to listen to the other boat. Always they heard the other oars, yet they grew fainter and less distinct, and whether it was because the fog carried all sound deceptively, or because the abductors of Violet were better oarsmen or possessed the swifter craft, soon the trail was lost altogether. When the fog lifted, as suddenly as it had swept in upon Violet nearly three hours before, Dupont found himself with his men far out in Jamaica Bay, no other vessel abroad or in sight.

Because Jake knew this resort section thoroughly Dupont left him in charge of two of the men, instructing him to search the entire Brooklyn shore for a place which could conceal the gang or their captive, suggesting that he investigate the Portola once more on a chance; that in particular he keep a shadow upon the Strangler. Because he realized now the value of the portrait

and the resourcefulness of his enemies, Dupont took the detective Joe into the city with him as bodyguard.

At the home of Miss Julia Sutton no one was up. Dupont stole in unobtrusively, phoning the detective agency. He learned from them that four more of their best men were available. Three of these he ordered to report to him at the Washington Square home. One he directed be sent to Jake at the earliest opportunity, to assist in the search of the Jamaica Bay waterfront.

When Thelma came down, eyes heavy-lidded from too much sleep, Dupont made his house arrangements. With three detectives to reinforce the one already with him there would be two shifts of two guards each. With the picture of Steele safe, he sat back, ill at ease, barricaded, to wait for word from Violet. At her home he was ready for her call.

XXVIII

A GLASS OF WATER

THE most vivid and enduring of all Violet's childhood recollections was the smell of Tuesday. After Saturday, a glorious play day always, there came Sunday, the have-to-sleep-late, dressed-up-in-white-and-mustn't-sit-down, hot and starched and thoroughly uncomfortable day. Then Monday was the one when everyone spoke crossly. Doctor Sutton, her guardian, was never to be seen on Monday. He buried himself in his laboratory as if to do penance to his science for the truancy of the Sabbath. Katy washed and—so Johnny Sterling, from across the street, affirmed—swore when it was hot. And her nurses, of whom Violet could remember a dozen, generally thought of things and sniffled.

But on Tuesday the universe was well ordered again. Katy always fixed a nice lunch and Doctor Sutton always ate with her. This was the day Katy ironed. With the clothes all in clean heaps in baskets in the kitchen, with a dozen irons on the coal stove, with an open bottle of stale beer on the table, Katy sang. Her vocal method was

cheerful monotony. Some one was the pride of our alley, and there was news which had to be broken to mother. Occasionally, for variety, there would be a reference to Annie Rooney.

Strongest in Violet's memory, however, was the odor of the wax as it was applied to the hot metal, of the various articles of clothing, as the Irish girl bore down upon them. This same smell first struck her nostrils when she awoke after her recapture in the Portola. This was so suggestive of her girlhood in Lawncrest that for several moments she lay still, almost ready to believe all her terrible experiences unreal, almost ready to accept the fact that she again was the child of ten, happy in the home of her upbringing.

Because she lay still, with eyes closed, the others in the room failed to realize she was awake.

"It's an outrage to let her go unmolested, unharmed."

"Evil Eye knows what he is doing, doesn't he?"

The second voice Violet recognized. The wheeze of the hunchback was unmistakable. But the first speaker, a woman, was strange to her, unless it was the wife, Lydia, whom she had never heard utter a sound.

"Maybe he does," complained the woman. "I'm not one as is saying things I oughtn't to say, but I say it's an outrage to let her go."

The man made no answer.

"She stole the map, didn't she?" demanded the woman, apparently irritated by his silence.

"Yes, unless some one else did."

"But she was the only one here, wasn't she? Didn't the map disappear when she did? Isn't that true?"

"Yes, that's true."

"And she tried to kill Vera there in the city, didn't she? Didn't she lift her up and dash her head against a marble corner, trying to dash out her brains? Answer me that!"

"I guess so."

"You guess so? You know so! She and her lover have made fools of all of us. You men have had her in your clutches and you've had him tied up and trussed up, and what's happened? You've let them put it over on you a dozen times. You're a bunch of fools, now, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Don't you 'uh-huh' me! Answer me! Aren't you all a bunch of fools?"

"See here!" There was a sudden burst of anger in his voice. "You needn't talk! If you hadn't gone to sleep last night, yourself—"

"Don't you talk back to me!" she screamed, in passion. "Don't you dare talk back to me, you little runt! Maybe I went to sleep, but I didn't let that big stiff lover of hers look me in the eye and tell me he was some one else and that he was in a barrel, and I didn't take and roll a pal of mine

off to a watery grave. Renard's as big a fool as the rest of you."

Suddenly the hunchback began to laugh. To Violet, lying motionless, it sounded like a file on tin. It was hard to repress a shudder.

"Go on!" muttered the woman. "It's funny to you, I suppose. How'd you like to be in that barrel. Why"— her voice mounted shrilly again —"if the Strangler hadn't caught Dupont you'd all believe him dead yet! Renard had us all chasing out, trying to find poor Noyes. And when the Strangler got Dupont he let him escape. He's free now and—"

Involuntarily an exclamation broke through Violet's lips. Dupont was safe! He would come to her rescue and, further, if he was safe the portrait was safe.

"Sh-h!" The warning was from Case.

Violet opened her eyes. They knew she was awake, so the pretense was useless. She did look about, as though just returning to consciousness; but it was no surprise to find that the woman was Lydia, that the room was the one in the shack from which she had escaped before.

Very suddenly, however, she realized that she lay beneath the blanket, rather than on top, and that she was absolutely stripped of clothing. Not even her underwear had been left upon her. As Case glanced toward the bed she colored. She drew the rough material more closely about

her, unconscious, in her embarrassment, of its scratch.

Case winked, the involuntary contraction of his facial muscles, and left. Violet turned to Lydia, pleading:

"Let me—let me have some clothes—anything!"

Lydia's face was immobile, expressionless. She paid absolutely no attention to Violet, but went on with her work. Suddenly Violet understood and wondered. Again the distinctive smell of the ironing board came to her.

Near Lydia, hanging here and there, were all the girl's garments. The woman apparently had washed them, for there were none of the stains of the salt or the dirt from the boats; even the torn places from her life-and-death struggle with Vera had been repaired, as near as she could tell. More, she saw a hat and a pair of slippers. They were not hers; Vera's, probably. She knew, intuitively, that she could wear them and that they would prove becoming. Lydia, busy with an iron heated over an oil stove, was finishing the last of her lingerie.

What did it mean? Why should the gang freshen her clothes, make her comfortable? Surreptitiously she felt of herself beneath the cover. The stickiness of the salt was gone. Slipping one hand out, she glanced at it. Clean! Again she colored. While unconscious she had been given a bath, or sponged. The red in her cheeks was

very deep until the humor of the situation struck her, the very sardonic humor of this treatment of her.

Within a few moments of Violet's awakening Lydia finished her task. She extinguished the little oil stove, took down the ironing board and stood it in a corner. Then with a final glance about she went to the door, leaving, closing and bolting it behind her.

Violet jumped up, wrapping the blanket about her. Making sure that the door was locked, pushing the bed against it, she scrambled into her clothes with feverish haste. The slippers, a little large, were fairly new and were very serviceable, almost exactly matching her stockings in their tint of gray. Her own clothes were amazingly fresh and bright. When nothing happened she put on the hat, a little enameled straw with a wisp of gray feather, and nearly clapped her hands in delight as she saw herself in a bit of broken glass tacked to the wall. Her hair, alone given no attention, a sticky mass still damp and heavy on her head, was effectually concealed except at its edges. Violet was ready to leave.

Could it be true? She remembered every word now. Lydia had said, very plainly, that she would be allowed to go, unmolested. The hunchback had made it very clear that such were the orders or wishes of Evil Eye. She pulled the bed back

in place, away from the door. She waited impatiently.

After some time there was a knock. Lydia entered with a tiny tray, setting it down, and leaving immediately. Violet, waiting until she was out, rushed to the door. It was locked again! In her disappointment she dropped to the bed, covering her face.

Finally she remembered the tray. She was not so hungry as she was thirsty, a natural result of her experiences. As she realized the fact her thirst became insupportable. Lydia had brought her a tall glass of water, containing a single piece of ice, and a box half full of crackers. While she nibbled at the latter she drank all the water. Though she noticed a strange, sweet insipidity, she gave it no thought at the time. Refreshed, she turned again toward the door.

As if the drinking of the water had been required of her, she now heard the bolt shoot back into its socket. Somewhat apprehensively she tried the door and found it open. She ventured out into the hall, then saw beyond its bend the dock and the water of the bay and the brilliant sunlight of mid-morning. Nothing hindered her as she left the shack. A narrow walk of wood led her to the mainland. A road beyond stretched straight into the distance. Not so far away were the trolley wires of civilization.

A street car took her through Brooklyn, across

the river, into Delancey Street. Not yet entirely willing to credit the actuality of her freedom, she walked to Washington Square.

At the house, the slouching, alert figure of a man caught her eye. She presumed him to be a detective. A moment later Thelma admitted her. In the parlor she heard the voice of Aunt Julia protesting, the tones of her own Robert in patient explanation. With arms wide, she pushed through the curtains, rushing to them.

"I'm safe!" she exclaimed. "They let me go of their own accord!"

XXIX

THE NIGHT PROWLER

POLICEMAN Barney Costigan strolled down the half block on Fifth Avenue from Eighth Street, turning in at Washington Mews to make his report. The police signal box was on the back wall of the Wanamaker home, just off the avenue. At this hour there was no life out in the square. In the Mews the short, squat artists' quarters, stables once, but now remodeled and very fashionable, displayed no lights or signs of late revelry. The busses had ceased operation for the night, long before. One lone taxicab, speeding through the arch and up by and past the policeman, made all the noise possible for a Ford, and in the midnight stillness it was quite a clatter, but Barney did not care. There was a tiny new arrival at his home, way over on Barrow Street, and his words to the sergeant were very perfunctory.

Had he been a little more observant, somewhat less absorbed in a certain baby face, he would have detected, perhaps, the slinking shadow of a hunchback in the Mews. The short, misshapen figure was silhouetted oddly against the arc in

University Place, at the other end of the alley, although the little man clung to the wall. He had been surprised by the sudden appearance of Costigan; had been left without any sort of cover or hiding place. But the policeman's mind was elsewhere. He hurried out of the alley, turning quickly toward the arch.

Immediately the hunchback darted down to a point beyond the stables and studios to where a brick wall shielded the back yards of the three or four Washington Square residences just east of Fifth Avenue. He paused at the gate of the fashionable old home of Miss Julia Sutton; then he hurried across the cobblestones and found a place to secrete himself, in a studio doorway, opposite.

Violet's room was a large chamber on the second floor at the rear of her aunt's house. Its windows overlooked the narrow back yard, where two trees struggled valiantly for life; they gave a glimpse beyond the high brick wall to the Mews and its miniature Latin Quarter.

The girl herself tossed restlessly in the spacious comfort of her bed. Now she would fling out a slender white tapering arm, as though to ward off some danger threatening her; then she would huddle up into a ball, gathering the filmy covers with her, looking for all the world like some little yellow kitten at play. But her eyes, turning from side to side beneath delicately veined lids, revealed the terrors of her dream.

Suddenly she woke. She saw in the semidarkness the wreck of her couch, and with a smile she slipped to the floor in her bare feet to rearrange the covering. There was an easy deliberation in her movements somehow foreign to her. The nervous alertness of her actions, distinctly characteristic, was missing. Beneath everything there lay the most subtle suggestion of the automaton, as if she were walking in her sleep or obeying the impulses of a mind not her own. But Violet Bronson, subject to strange fancies and premonitions, had never revealed the slightest tendency toward obsession. No one, not even Dupont, had ever hypnotized her. Now her eyes were open wide; and her smile, full, red, with its flash of glistening teeth, was unmistakably hers.

Her bed arranged, she hesitated; then she went to her dressing table, switching on the light and shaking down her hair. In the mirror, washed now, it was a glorious burst of spun gold, an aureole formed as the illumination caught the flying strands, coating them each in radiance. She slipped her arms free of the clinging silk of her nightdress, arranging and rearranging her coiffure a dozen times before it suited her. Moving to the bed leisurely, she pulled on her stockings and teased toes into the slippers she had worn away from the shack out in Brooklyn.

All at once an impulse of haste swept over her. She rose and glanced about the room eagerly.

After several purposeless trips between the dressing table and the bed, she hurried to the closet, there taking from its hanger a trim little pearl-gray suit, much worn by her in the cool days of the preceding spring. She slipped the skirt of this on over her nightclothes, and then stood looking about almost foolishly for a belt. Shaking her head, finally she decided to do without it, and put on the coat of the suit without a waist, buttoning it tightly. In the pocket were suède gloves. She stopped to work these on her fingers and to powder her face carefully. After that she hurried from the room, a set look of determination in her expression.

Dupont had pre-empted the one guest room on the second floor for himself and the detectives. Two cots had been placed against the farther wall, and the bed moved so as to give the men a chance to dress and get about. While Dupont planned to keep regular hours and suit his movements to those of the family, the detectives arranged eight-hour shifts, sleeping in their clothes and changing at midnight, in the morning, and in the afternoon. Of the two men just relieved, one lay on his back, snoring very feebly, the other slept with his pillow doubled beneath his arms and his head square upon the rough iron corner of the cot.

Violet entered the room softly, and looked at the two guards without particular concern in her

features. Glancing at Dupont, she hesitated, but after a moment her interest became as impersonal as in the other men and she passed by him to the bookcase. Here the portrait of Steele was hidden in a slit made in the cover of a huge atlas and only visible when the two boards were drawn back away from the binding. Together, that afternoon, they had planned this method of secreting the precious canvas. They had carried their scheme into execution while the two detectives then off duty were down in Thelma's domain, eating an early supper. No one but Dupont and herself knew where the painting was placed.

With silent care but rather remarkable strength she lifted the atlas down to the floor. Squatting there before it, she pressed the covers back and removed the picture. Replacing the heavy book, rolling the canvas and slipping it beneath her arm, she left the room without causing the slightest stir or making the faintest sound.

She stole downstairs rapidly, as though she possessed eyes to see in the darkness. In the pantry she took wrapping paper and string, making a neat package of the painting. Still holding it under her arm, she went to the front door, opening it cautiously.

"Hey!" The guard's voice was a hoarse, somewhat startled whisper.

"I can't sleep," she said. "Are you sure everything is all right?"

"Oh! Miss Bronson!" He chuckled in the gloom. "Of course it is," he exclaimed, reassuringly. "Nothing can happen now."

"Thank you!"

She closed the door and hurried through the house to the rear. Joe, the man brought back from the Portola by Dupont, was posted here.

"Mr. Man!" she called, in a low voice.

"Yes!" He came running. "Yes, Miss Bronson," as he recognized her. "Anything wrong?"

She led the way to the little wooden door in the wall leading to the Mews. Opening it, she stepped through. At that he put out a hand, taking her arm and stopping her.

"Excuse me," he apologized, "but it is very dangerous for you to go out alone at this time of night. Does Mr. Dupont know—"

"Of course Robert knows," she interrupted. Though she spoke quickly and decisively, there was yet a strange listlessness, an unaccountable far-away quality in her voice. Too, her enunciation was even, again subtly suggesting the automaton. "Robert knows and approves of everything I do," she stated, evenly.

Joe was suspicious. He was unable to explain the feeling that something was wrong. There was nothing tangible about the girl to warrant his interference; nothing out of the way in her attire that he could see, nor in her manner; yet—

"It's—it's two o'clock in the morning," he

stammered. "Certainly you can wait until daytime, or if it's anything of vital importance we can wake one of the other men and send him—"

This time she did not answer.

He studied her face, revealed clearly in the light of the arc at Fifth Avenue. The only thing strange about her was that she never quite met his eyes, nor did her own glance remain fixed upon any one object more than an instant. There was the elusive suggestion of the drug addict in her expression, however impossible the hypothesis.

Suddenly she started away again. Joe acted according to his sense of duty. He seized her, almost roughly, to drag her back into the yard. As he did so she whirled about with lightning speed. Her hands went to his throat, pressing in upon the veins with the strength of a maniac. Joe remembered, until he lost consciousness, that she was the woman he was employed to protect. He made no attack upon her to try to break her hold. His last recollection was of her features. In her face there had not been the slightest flicker of change of expression.

As the guard dropped to the ground, unconscious, Violet stooped to pick up the portrait, which she had dropped. Tucking it under her arm once more, she walked out into the Mews, then stood uncertain and hesitating.

From his place of concealment, Case, the hunchback, stepped forward to meet her. She smiled.

With a certain little air of graciousness she handed him the roll of canvas.

"Thank you, lady!" he muttered in a low voice. He bowed slightly, and as he did so the characteristic wink distorted the flabby flesh about his eyes.

Violet waited impassively.

"Oh yes!" The hunchback fumbled in his clothes. "Here it is," he wheezed, giving her a small package in return.

She tore off the paper, revealing a small bottle and a tiny sponge. Smiling again, she turned and left the little man, paying no further attention to him. He hurried off in the direction of University Place, the portrait safely grasped in a pudgy hand. She re-entered the little door to her aunt's back yard, closing it carefully behind her.

First she stopped to see that the detective was still unconscious. Then she entered the kitchen, and in the pantry turned on the lights. Here several drawers contained silver. After some changes of mind she selected a small carving knife with a bright sharp edge and point. Fingering the switch, she plunged the little service hall once more in darkness.

Upstairs, she entered the room where Dupont slept, with the two guards off duty. Placing the knife on a table by the man she loved, she took the tiny bottle in one hand, the diminutive sponge

in the other, and approached the first of the detectives, the one who snored.

But suddenly and for the very first time there came a genuine change of expression in her features. As if checked by an invisible hand, she stood stock-still in the middle of the chamber. The struggle, hardly to be seen in the impenetrable gloom, was revealed by a twitching of her sensitive mouth, by a narrowing and a widening of the pupils of her eyes. It was as if she were asleep and her spirit was clamoring for admission to her body, left for the night without its guide.

A trembling seized her. Inarticulate sounds died in her throat, without utterance. Then the moment passed. She became placid as before, deep again in the strange, unaccountable mood to which she had awakened.

She regrasped the bottle in one hand, the sponge in the other. Hurrying to the side of the snoring guard, she saturated the sponge with the contents of the bottle and held it beneath his nose until his breathing died off to the faintest flutter.

Stealing to the second guard, she chloroformed him in similar fashion. Afterward she tossed both bottle and sponge out the open window, listening until she heard the crash of glass in the areaway below.

For several moments she stood silent. Next she walked slowly to the side of Dupont. Groping about the surface of the little table, she found and

clasped the carving knife. With her other hand she felt of the bedclothes until she located his exact position. Standing close to him, she raised the knife. Making sure she was placed correctly for the stab, she started her arm on the downward strike.

Before she could drive the blade home the invisible influence once more checked her. Again there was the twitching of her lips, the dilation and contraction of her eyes. Again she trembled, again inarticulate sounds in vain tried to break past the bound cords of her throat.

Once more the struggle ended without result. She became placid and purposeful, as she had been. With her left hand she fumbled about the sleeping figure of Dupont to locate the place she wished to strike. This time she pulled the covering back to his waist, smoothed the folds of his pajamas over his heart. Then she raised her right arm, the knife firmly grasped, muscles tensed; death poised, vibrant, over its victim.

XXX

MASTERY

DUPONT woke abruptly, and with quick instinct toward self-preservation, rolled to the farther side of the bed. As he did so there was the gleam and flash of the knife in the hand of Violet; a dull pop as she struck and as the point of the blade punctured the linen.

For several moments he lay uncomprehending, accustoming his eyes to the gloom. Then he detected the figure of the girl, failing to recognize her. Reaching under the pillow he had vacated, cautiously, he grasped his automatic. With his other hand he found and pressed the pendant switch of a shaded reading lamp attached to the back of the bed. In numbing amazement he saw that the intruder was his fiancée, that nothing but a psychic alertness had saved him from death at her hands.

In the circle of warm light she was revealed, a picture, motionless, a cameo carved out of the darkness. After the futile stab she had paused as if unable to grasp the situation. Her delicate fingers still rested upon the handle of the blade

Supreme Pictures Inc. A SCENE FROM THE PHOTOPLAY STARRING I ROBERT PAULINE ***The Mystery Mind***

stuck into the bed. Wisps of yellow hair, rebellious after her shampoo, caressed cheeks which were very red and flushed, as though nature had made her up for this spotlight. The top button of her suit had come unfastened, showing the fine lace of her nightgown and revealing an intimacy of marble throat and neck which lent a bizarre note to her costume. Her lips were pouted slightly, demurely. About her was nothing suggestive of the assassin.

As he watched her she moved again. Very slowly and deliberately she pulled the knife, regrasping it firmly. Leaning forward, she passed her free hand over the bedclothes until she felt the outline of his form. He lay very quiet, striving to understand the phenomenon.

The trace of a puzzled frown crept over her forehead. It was a long reach to the man now. After some moments she climbed up on to the bed and worked her way close on her knees. Once more she located his heart by the sense of touch, raising the blade to stab again.

Her eyes gave Dupont a clue to her condition. When the light was switched on, very sudden and dazzling, they did not blink, and though they were open and gave her expression every appearance of consciousness, hardly suggesting somnambulism, yet even in the bright illumination she seemed dependent upon the sense of touch.

He noticed, too, that while she appeared to

look at him—there was no blankness nor abstraction in the pupils, and no dilation—yet she did not quite meet his gaze, but rather fastened her eyes upon a point half an inch to an inch lower than his. The expression of her face otherwise was normal. The curve of her mouth and the set of her eyebrows were sweetly familiar. An unusual tranquillity marked her, with just a trace of determination.

Rather than moving, seeking to defend himself by eluding the blow a second time, he remained still, bending his will to the mastery of the girl and whatever influence held her in subjection. Before the might of his glance she hesitated, and her own eyes wavered. As in the invisible, silent struggle before her first attempt to stab him, the pupils dilated and contracted in swift successive phases. Her look traveled around and around, never leaving his face, but never centering and meeting his glance squarely.

He knew that if he could fix her eyes he would win. There was no wavering in his purpose, no moment of fear that she might strike now. She began to tremble. The color left her cheeks. Her mouth dropped, slightly agape. Through it all, however, there was no change in her expression.

Once, twice, three times she raised her arm, flexed her muscles, and struck downward. Each time the sheer strength of Dupont's will power checked her in the midst of the blow.

Now there were beads of perspiration upon her forehead. Her glance, rotating about his still, circled more and more swiftly. All at once a little groan escaped between her lips. Her lids half closed. The grim, obsessing personality behind her surrendered. Her eyes, losing their hard, frightened glitter, met the warm friendliness of his look for the first time. Recognition came into her features. With its coming all fear fled from her.

"Robert!" she exclaimed, very softly.

Then she saw the knife in her hand and threw it to the floor. She grasped the oddness of her attire and the strangeness of her position. A characteristic playfully demure scowl testified to her lack of comprehension.

He explained as far as he could piece together her actions. Then he questioned her. "Didn't you tell me you were given some crackers and a glass of water before you were released by Evil Eye? And—and didn't you have a sort of feeling that they expected you to eat and drink; that you were not released until you did? "Didn't"—he smiled ruefully—"didn't you tell me you half expected you were poisoned?"

She nodded. "I didn't think so, really," she confessed.

"Was there anything peculiar about the taste of the water?"

"Yes!" She began to understand now. "It

tasted awfully sweet, and yet it didn't taste sweet at all. It—it was insipid."

"That's it, Violet! When I was down studying voodooism among the West Indians they told me of a hypnotic drink some of the magicians among them could make, but I didn't believe it. We might have known Evil Eye wouldn't turn you loose without a reason."

She began to tremble violently. She snuggled down on top of the covers, so that she was lying close to him. She raised her head to allow him to slip an arm underneath and about her. "I—I might have killed you!" she moaned, beginning to sob quietly.

"You didn't," he reassured her. He smiled, little suspecting that the portrait was gone, that three of his four guards lay unconscious and helpless. "No damage has been done," he chuckled.

Gradually she became quiet. After a while he looked at her, discovering that she had fallen asleep, secure in his embrace. The light was in her eyes. He hesitated, then switched it off.

In the darkness he was conscious, slowly, of the presence of some invisible enemy. Was this the influence which had dictated the actions of the girl? Something about it was vaguely familiar. A strange phenomenon was his feeling that, while he was able to sense its nearness, it, in turn, was aware and conscious of him, of his reflections.

The minutes passed and much of the night

slipped away. Sleep did not come to him. Violet lay still, her slumber untroubled by dreams. The presence hovered, neither gaining nor losing in strength. To Dupont it was as though some living man, some throbbing thing, sat close, waiting, reading his thoughts with ease, rather amused at his mental discomfort. Now and then he caught the faintest odor of sandalwood, the odor of the astral double as taught him by a Hindu teacher years before. That the intruder was no tangible reality he understood. He felt no fear. Yet he knew that here was the mental embodiment of the menace faced by Violet and himself.

"Who are you?" he asked, finally, in his irritation.

"I am the Mystery Mind."

To his surprise, he had not framed his question audibly. As though from instinct he had projected it directly from his brain. In the same way the answer returned to him. He heard, but not with physical ears.

"Are you Evil Eye?" he asked.

Echoing in space came a cold, distant, mocking laugh. "Evil Eye is my servant, mine to do with as I wish. Phantom Face was my servant and Phantom Face I destroyed. Evil Eye I will destroy if Evil Eye fails. I have many servants, and my power is beyond your power to check."

"Who are you, Mystery Mind?"

"I am the living arm of the Devil God."

All at once a fantastic realization came home to Dupont. He knew, and could not tell just how he knew, that in this sort of psychic conversation it was impossible to project a lie. So long as the invisible presence was willing to answer, it was forced to answer with the truth.

"Have you a body, a physical, breathing, human body?" he asked.

Again there came the hollow laughter. But the tones came increasingly soft and distant, as if the Mystery Mind feared the questions of Dupont now, wished to avoid the necessity of reply.

"Yes! I am a man, like yourself, but I have the power of a god!" Even through the silent spheres there came the vibrant echoes of his pride.

"Are you here? Is your physical self in New York, in the United States?"

The answer, the final answer, was so faint that Dupont could hardly hear it, even in the realm of mind.

"No! I dwell in the Cavern of the Skull, at the headwaters of the Orinoco."

XXXI

"DOMES OF SILENCE"

"ROBERT is wholly unreasonable, Mr. Clews," Violet stated, with emphasis. Then her expression softened very wonderfully. "He's a dear boy, though," she added, so that no one would misunderstand her feelings.

The man glanced at her appreciatively, noting her heightened color and the slim trimness of her as she sat, very erect, on one of Miss Julia Sutton's upholstered parlor chairs.

"I'm surprised he hasn't listened to you before this," Clews murmured. "I don't see how he could refuse you anything."

Violet ignored the compliment. "He did, however. He said he's bumped into enough danger by being in a hurry, and that he wasn't going to risk my safety again."

Clews was a dapper individual with a tiny, bristling mustache and pointed eyebrows. He raised the latter questioningly. "You mean, Miss Bronson, that he thought if your aunt engaged me to run down the band it would"—a note of indignation crept into his voice—"it would bring you

into danger? Why—why—" He sputtered to silence.

"Mercy, no!" Violet laughed merrily. "Aunt Julia and I told him of your wonderful success as a detective abroad, and out in San Francisco, and all that, but when Aunt Julia said you would only take the case on condition that all other detectives were called off and that you were left unhampered and unquestioned, why"—her eyes softened and she paused momentarily, as she did always when she called up some mental picture of him—"why, he said it was a risk and that he wouldn't chance it."

"A risk! Me? With the case in the hands of David Clews; with my reputation abroad—" Clews jumped to his feet and began pacing up and down, endangering several of Miss Sutton's most obtrusive ornaments.

"Please!" Violet waved her hands, distressed. "Please don't get excited over it. He—Robert didn't mean anything personal. He—he had only just heard of you through Aunt Julia and myself."

Mollified, the detective resumed his seat. "Now, Miss Bronson, I am to understand that I have full rein; that all the guards have been sent away?" He coughed in his handkerchief. "That is right, Miss Bronson?"

She nodded.

"And as for terms—"

She stopped him. "Render your bill and Aunt

Julia or myself will pay it, whatever the amount." She sighed. "Thank heavens those other detectives are gone," she exclaimed. "For nearly a month, now, Mr. Clews, I haven't had a bit of peace. Day and night there has been a man in front and another in back and two asleep upstairs or down flirting with Thelma, until poor Aunt Julia is nearly crazy. Every time I wanted to go out to shop, or anything, I would have to take a man with me. It—"

"That all will be changed," Clews assured her. "I only wish Mr. Dupont had listened to your aunt and given me the case before that poor medium was killed, and the man from the agency. I—I could have saved you the terrible night out in the fog, Miss Bronson; and, too, you would have escaped the experience which came from drinking the hypnotic water—"

"You have known Aunt Julia that long?" interrupted Violet.

"Indeed, I met her at Mrs. Denner-Dudley's tea about two days after you came to live with her. She spoke about the case then."

Thelma, appearing in the doorway, coughed; a cough cultivated after a laborious reading of a number of American paper-backed novels.

"There's a peddler out here, Miss Violet," she began. "He—"

As she spoke the man pushed in. He had the appearance of a Russian Jew of the better class.

His clothes, reasonably clean, were tight fitting, and his hair, unkempt, trailed his collar. He wore glasses with huge lenses, and his glance, narrowing to a squint, accentuated a peculiar aggressiveness often developed by his race in New York's teeming East Side.

"Excuse me, lady," he sputtered, with a tongue seemingly more used to the gutturals of Yiddish than the hissing sibilants of English. "I show you—"

Without waiting for encouragement or even recognition from Violet, he opened up a battered suit case, revealing rows of little boxes labeled "Domes of Silence." Glancing about jerkily, handicapped by his poor sight, he picked upon a chair with fine spindle legs, one of Miss Sutton's choice antiques. Upturning this, and producing a little shoemaker's hammer from his bag, he affixed four of the domes, one upon the bottom of each leg. It gave a smooth metal, rounded, sliding surface.

"See!" he exclaimed, with a very Je[illegible] gesture. "You push it so, and the carpet—" An expressive shrug told more completely than words of the wear and tear saved the Oriental fabric beneath. It was a very persuasive shrug.

Violet laughed. "You don't know my aunt Julia," she remarked. "If she saw those knobs on the bottom of that particular chair—whew!"

"You should attempt to sell them first to Mrs. Denner-Dudley," suggested Clews, with a side glance for approval at Violet.

At that moment Miss Sutton, coming down the stairs to greet Clews on her way to some social affair, entered in time to see the peddler with the hair, again upturned, in his grasp, for purposes of demonstration, and with his sprawling suit case, open behind him, shedding its decaying near-leather upon her rug. Flaring up immediately, waiting neither for second thought nor explanation, she rushed for him in complete forgetfulness of her dignity and social position. While Violet and Clews watched the scene in delight, she jerked the "Domes of Silence" from their places upon her property, then marched the protesting man to the door and shoved him out bodily. Thelma, at her direction, cast the suit case and loose knobs out onto the porch after him, slamming the door. Aunt Julia, calming down, thereupon turned to the other two somewhat apologetically.

"I will be at the reception until about five; that's an hour and a half. Then I'll return for you, Violet, if you'll be dressed—"

The girl nodded.

"She'll be perfectly safe, Miss Sutton," Clews interjected. He coughed in his handkerchief again. "By the way," he asked, "will there be anyone in the house besides Thelma?"

Aunt Julia drew herself up. "No, Mr. Clews.

I'm very quiet and old-fashioned, and I try to get along with one servant."

When they were alone the detective turned to Violet. "Would you show me the telephone, Miss Bronson?" At the instrument he seemed abstracted; then he glanced at her again. "I wonder if I could ask something else of you?"

She smiled. "Of course!"

"Then—ah—would you mind going to the basement to tell Thelma not to pay any attention to anything which may happen upstairs in the next hour or hour and a half? I—I shall experiment with one of my famous devices."

Violet was somewhat puzzled, but she realized that if he was to obtain results he must have thorough co-operation. She impressed the instructions upon Thelma with quite a degree of emphasis, after which she hurried up again.

Clews was just completing his phone conversation. "Yes! Send the car here! . . . That's right! Good-by!" Hanging up, he saw her. "I'm laying my plans," he explained.

She glanced at her watch. "If you don't mind, Mr. Clews! I've just about time to dress—!"

"By all means! By all means!"

In her room some sense of premonition struck Violet. She wondered all at once if she had been right in insisting upon Aunt Julia's plan to employ Clews against Robert's wish to continue the methods which had preserved her safely for over

a month. He had given in to her, finally; he had been very gracious, very nice about it. But—

She was nearly ready for dinner when she heard the sound of a machine outside. She paid no attention to it, but continued her preparations. She stood before the long mirror to admire herself in her evening gown, the first she had worn since Doctor Sutton's death. As she caught the reflection of a glorious flush of health and youth she smiled. At that moment there was a knock at her room.

She opened the door, standing back. It was Clews, but there was a different expression upon his face, a changed something about his manner. Advancing straight to her, he slipped his hands down her arms caressingly, then drew her to him before she could realize what had happened.

"At last, you little beauty," he muttered. "Ever since I first put eyes upon you I've wanted to hold you in my arms. When you stood up by your lover that night in the studio, with never a look for the"— a tone of irony crept into his voice—"for the inventor of the world's most wonderful hypnotic machine—"

In a flash Violet understood. The events of Nerva's séance came back to her vividly. Clews was the supposed Frenchman who had arrived first, who had left hurriedly when Dupont started to engage him in conversation in French. He had masqueraded as a detective successfully enough

to fool them all. He had been patient enough so that Aunt Julia's intervention, supported by her, had again put her in the hands of her enemies.

She struggled, but it was useless. She heard other steps, unfamiliar steps, on the stair. She felt the man's breath, hot, upon the bare flesh of her neck. Then she knew no more.

XXXII

TO APPEASE THE DEVIL GOD

THE sense of humor which always had been a proud possession of Robert Dupont, and which had carried him through any number of difficult situations, nearly proved the undoing of the whole of his care and work when Violet, of all the people in the world, failed to penetrate his disguise. Thelma and Aunt Julia might hardly be expected to see through his make-up. As for Clews—it had been his particular wish to try its efficacy upon this new detective employed by Aunt Julia. For that purpose alone he had made the trip down to Washington Square, had forced himself into the house. But Violet—!

A passer-by might have thought the actions of the supposed Jewish peddler strange as Dupont rocked and shook with suppressed chuckles. He picked up his scattered "Domes of Silence," but with difficulty, due to the trembling of his fingers. He packed them again in his battered suit case, wondering if that receptacle would hold together during the execution of the task he had set before himself. He readjusted his heavy eyeglasses and

rearranged his garments, descending to the street on legs which still were weak from the strain of covering his laughter at the absurd treatment given him.

His course was strange and direct for a house-to-house canvasser. He made no further calls, but turned up to Eighth Street, then walked west to Sixth Avenue and diagonally up Greenwich Avenue to the express subway station at Twelfth Street and Seventh. There he took a Van Cortlandt Park train and rode nearly ten miles to the north, alighting at Dyckman Street.

Passing by the mushroom growths of apartment buildings, which would have been his natural field of operations if he had been a genuine peddler, he made his way to Broadway and turned again to the north and once more into an unpaved and unnamed street to the west, little more than an alley leading in a general direction toward the Hudson and mounting the slight preliminary rise which behind became Inwood Hill.

Here was a relic of old New York, a rambling frame farmhouse still surrounded by its fields and barns. There was some live stock in sight; chickens scratched about in the yard and road; more, a number of cheap garments hung out on a line to dry, the wash of a farmer's wife.

Dupont lumbered up the center of the road, adopting the walk of a man who had been trudging city streets interminably and who resented this

bit of country dirt. In plain sight from Broadway, once the brow of the hill was mounted, but concealed from the house, was a man on watch. His interest seemed to be in the inmates of this little farm.

The hypnotist paid no attention to him. As Dupont passed, however, the watcher mouthed a message just loud enough to carry.

"All inside, boss! No one has left, no one has arrived." It was Jake, the operative who had worked with Dupont at Jamaica Bay.

Dupont set down his grip, pulling out a colored pocket handkerchief to mop his face and neck. Under its cover he could speak.

"Wait till night unless they spot me and I don't come out."

"Gotcha, boss!"

"How many of you?"

"Two now, ten at dark."

"Right!"

Wearily the peddler took up his case of samples, continuing to the house. At the front door he looked about in vain for a bell and, finding none, knocked vigorously. There was no response, but he persisted. Finally a hatchet-faced woman answered to his knock with a scowl. She was dressed in rather ragged print goods, still wet in spots from her washing. Her hair was skinned back into a scrawny knot caught and held with two huge hairpins. A greasy sunbonnet hung

down her back, its strings tied carelessly about her neck. The make-up, as a slatternly farmer's wife, was perfect. Yet Dupont suspected her to be Lydia, the wife of Case, described to him by Violet.

"We don't want nawthing," she drawled, with a nasal twang, after a moment's inspection of the canvasser. Then she attempted to shut the door.

He put his foot in the jamb and pushed in by her, as he had done at Washington Square. With a few muttered words he opened his case, spreading it out and making himself at home so that it would be difficult to eject him in a hurry. Meanwhile, swiftly, surely, he studied the interior arrangement without appearing to do so.

Here was no farmhouse. Heavy shutters had been rigged inside each window. Huge timbers had been fashioned to barricade the door. To a casual observer the preparations would not be obvious because muslin curtains had been hung to conceal them, while a general effort had been made to keep up a correspondence with the outside of the place.

His intrusion had been utterly unexpected, because a further room lay wide open before him. Although a black-shrouded figure, with muttered exclamations, hastened to pull sliding doors between Dupont and himself, Dupont had a glimpse of somber hangings and a strange, barbaric altar.

Case, the hunchback, rushed into the room from some back wing of the house, excited. He was followed by a girl in knee dresses and pigtails, whom Dupont nevertheless recognized as Vera. Vera Collins, in fact, by some miracle of consistency, had abandoned cosmetics and had cultivated a tan and freckles and a shiny nose.

"Who let this man in?" demanded Case of his wife, in some South American Spanish patois.

"He pushed in," she answered, sullenly.

"Father!" Vera spoke in the same dialect. There was an ironical twinge to her words as she addressed Case. "The men are watching still. I just saw one."

"What of it?"

"They may question this peddler," Vera explained. "He has seen our arrangements."

"He hasn't seen anything," insisted Lydia. "Look at him! He's a stupid Russian Jew!"

At that moment the lid of a chest, apparently placed in a little alcove as a window seat, was pushed up from within, and Renard stepped out. He was dressed, as Case, in farmer's garb. From his expression of surprise Dupont grasped that he had betrayed the entrance to a secret passage.

"What the hell—" he began, in English, seeing Dupont.

Vera hastened to explain in Spanish. Renard grinned finally.

"Leave it to me," he remarked. "No one will

question him, and it don't make any difference whether he's seen anything or not."

Then, as he turned to Dupont, no recognition in his face, he spoke in English. "Hey, Jake! Want to make some money—a lot of money?"

Dupont nodded eagerly. Renard indicated that he pack up his bag. Dupont obeyed. Renard went to the secret passage, motioning for Dupont to precede him. Stairs led down to a basement room, long abandoned, from its appearance. Then a newly excavated tunnel connected it with a timber-covered drain or sewer, dry now, and apparently dating back nearly to revolutionary days. Footmarks pointed off in both directions.

Dupont did not wait to learn Renard's further intentions, suspecting their nature. Unarmed, he turned suddenly, grasping the other man by the throat. Renard was taken by surprise. It had never entered his head that Dupont was other than he seemed to be. He dropped his electric torch, struggling desperately, but futilely. Attempting to pull away, he struck his head, collapsing limp in Dupont's arms.

Dupont trussed him with two handkerchiefs, gagged him with a torn strip of shirt. Then he dragged the body to a depression, where it lay more or less out of sight, all that could be done with the little time at Dupont's disposal. Choosing at random, he hurried to one end of the old drain, finding it masked by a thick growth of

bushes and weeds, and emerging to the open air some distance from the little farm.

Circling around the house cautiously, he found Sam, Jake's partner. Instructing him to signal Jake, he arranged for the two detectives to explore the secret passageway, so that both ends could be watched. Then he hurried off to find a telephone, to hurry the arrival of the other operatives for the raid.

After phoning the agency, a sudden thought struck him. Violet! He assumed that she was safe; he had felt that she would be safe until after the raid; but now a sense of uneasiness took hold of him. He called the Washington Square number rather apprehensively.

For a long while there was no answer. He insisted that Central ring the number. At last a male voice responded.

"Clews?" he hazarded.

"No, this is Costigan! Patrolman Barney Costigan! What d'you want?"

"Patrolman—" He gasped. "Has anything happened?"

"Uh—who are you?"

"This is Robert Dupont. I'm living with Miss Sutton and I'm engaged to her niece. Now tell me if anything's wrong."

"Gee!" The policeman's voice was sympathetic. "You'd better come home
According to the Swede girl—

now, and raving—the young lady was kidnaped late this afternoon by a big man in a limousine and a detective by the name of Clews. We found Miss Julia Sutton in the parlor, in the wreckage of a lot of furniture, dead, throttled."

Inarticulate, dazed, not realizing what he was doing, Dupont started for Washington Square. Then he remembered the raid and stopped. His men were waiting for him. Furthermore, a new hope caught him. He realized that Violet probably would be brought to this headquarters of the gang. It was too late to do anything for Miss Sutton. But Violet—

At the entrance to the secret passage he found Sam still on guard.

"Jake's at the other end," whispered the detective. "The rest of the men will be here in half an hour; Bill came in advance, by motorcycle."

"Give me your revolver," directed Dupont. His face was very grim. "And the electric torch," he added. "As soon as you are all here rush the place from four sides."

"Where are you going, Mr. Dupont?"

Dupont didn't hear. He retraced his steps of earlier in the afternoon and soon was poised beneath the cover of the supposed window seat in the house. He drew his weapon. He heard a muffled murmur and bustle above. For a moment he fumbled at random, [illegible]
drain, finding it must be a sacrifice," rang out one

voice above the others, in deep, sepulchral tones; "she shall die to appease the wrath of the Devil God! She shall die because we have not learned the secret of the map to the treasure in the Cavern of the Skull!"

Dupont flung up the lid, jumping out to face them. "Up with your hands, all of you!"

Violet, held by Evil Eye, was close to the altar. Ranged about her were Case and Lydia, Vera, and Detective Clews. Dupont turned to the last in grim triumph.

"I've known you all along, Dupree," he muttered. "I let you think you had me fooled so I could follow you and learn the headquarters of the gang. But now it's all up. I've evidence on everyone of you—you, Dupree for the murder of Miss Julia Sutton."

"Not so easy as all that," came in amused tones from behind Dupont. At the same instant Renard's arms slipped beneath his, disarming him and catching him helpless with a full-nelson. "Who would think our peddler here was Mr. Dupont?" chuckled the fox.

XXXIII

AN ESCAPE IN THE DARK

VIOLET gazed at the situation before her in horror. Dupont was helpless in the grip of Renard, although he struggled desperately to break the clasp of the fox's arms, strove to raise his head, to resist the numbing pressure against the back of his neck.

For several moments no one else moved. The other members of the band seemed fascinated by the kaleidoscopic happenings; first the wholly unexpected appearance of Dupont through the secret passage, then the dramatic arrival of the missing Renard in time to foil the hypnotist.

Violet's heart sank low, she felt herself yielding to utter despair. Still ringing in her memory was the scream of terror from Aunt Julia, perhaps the last earthly cry of that unfortunate spinster. In Renard's ruthless grasp the girl had been hurried out to the waiting machine in full daylight; had been carried off without so much as a curious glance from the afternoon crowds in Washington Square. Renard's companion, whom she had not seen, had remained behind. Again and again, in

some corner of her brain, Violet heard the echo of the scream. She did not know for a certainty the fate of Miss Sutton; she only remembered the tragic killing of the woman's brother little over a month before.

"Don't let him—don't let him get you with his eyes," cautioned Renard, growing breathless with Dupont's struggling.

Suddenly Violet realized that Dupont had not given up, was not giving up so long as an ounce of energy remained within him. And she? Had she not yielded all hope at a moment when possibly she might help him? Had she not forgotten her own grapple with Vera Collins in Mesma's studio, the time when she had demonstrated her own hidden strength and resource and courage?

She glanced about swiftly. Near her stood Evil Eye, his face covered even in the excitement. Priest of the cult, his particular charge was the altar, a black-covered pedestal directly at his hand. Here burned a chemical flame of some sort, without smoke or odor, furnishing the only illumination in the sweep of the two rooms. It was an uncertain light, however, dancing up and down and casting flickering shadows on features which seemed unreal in their chalkiness. As the faces stood out, like mummers' masks at a festival of ghosts, or merged into the gloom, as though evil spirits incarnate sought here to dematerialize,

Violet was reminded vividly of her nightmare and the Cavern of the Skull. Yet she must shake off the spell; must aid the man who had risked so much for her happiness.

At the intrusion of Dupont, Evil Eye had dropped his hold upon her arm. Dupree, or Clews as she knew him, had likewise released her after conducting her to the altar and to the side of Evil Eye. Lydia and Case, an odd and gloatingly evil couple even in the shifting unearthly light, were together near one of the barricaded windows of the room back from the altar. So close that the hunchback could touch them were the struggling Dupont and Renard. Behind Renard was the bulking figure of the Strangler. Later Violet grasped that the Strangler had found and released Renard in hurrying to the headquarters following his murder of Miss Sutton. Vera Collins stood in the doorway between the rooms, on the other side.

With the swift impulse of thought Violet acted. Perhaps the memory of the conflict with Vera helped. She sprang, so suddenly that the gangsters were utterly unprepared, throwing the whole of her weight against Evil Eye. He stumbled, as she had planned, into the altar, setting it to rocking. Then before he could call out or disengage his arms from his robes she was upon him again, pushing, clawing, bending him back over the flame. In an instant it was over. The altar

fell with a crash, splashing fire across the floor. Into the wreckage toppled Evil Eye.

Violet leaped for Vera Collins, forgetting her hampering skirts, her sex, her former fear of the woman and of the gang. Vera somehow stood in terror of Violet now. Her resistance was half hearted. Violet literally threw her over upon top of Evil Eye. For a moment it seemed that the flame from the fallen altar would start a conflagration, that the fire would spread to the garments of Evil Eye and Vera. Instead, like burning alcohol, they died or were snuffed out almost immediately.

In the brief second of half illumination Violet dashed to the side of Dupont. As the rooms went dark she groped for Renard. Her hands closed upon his face, her fingers upon his eyes. Only half realizing the pain she caused she pressed in upon his eyes with all her strength, until the fox, with a cry of agony, released the hypnotist.

Immediately Dupont seized her arm. As he did so she called out, with presence of mind, to confuse the others.

"The door, Robert! Hurry to the door!"

Case and his wife, Clews, the Strangler—these seemed to have been held fascinated by the swiftness of events. At her voice they awoke to action. There was a sound of several figures hurrying to the front entrance. Violet, brought to the den through the secret passage, and knowing it,

guided Dupont toward the seat giving access to the stairs. He was weakened to such an extent that he barely could walk. She feared the Strangler might yet be on guard at the window. She wondered, with mounting fear, if she could outwit that man.

Fortunately the way was clear. No one accosted them as they groped for the side of the steps as they stole across the basement, and as they made a precarious escape through the long tunnel and the old drain, to the outer air.

Emerging, Dupont glanced about. He was beginning to recover from the effects of his struggle against Renard's deadly grip.

"Where's Sam?" Dupont muttered. "Where's the man I left here on guard?"

It was dusk, and the daylight was fading appreciably. But something caught the eye of the hypnotist. He stooped, pulling aside a natural mask of underbrush. Lying in the moss and leaves was the figure of the operative. He was dead, and at his throat were the finger marks of the only one who could have throttled him—the Strangler.

XXXIV

CHESTER RANDOLPH

DUPONT straightened and turned to Violet. In a new, set desperation, all weakness vanished. As he took her arm she knew that he was the leader now. She had piloted him from danger, had rescued him from the dread haunt of the devil worshipers. But at the sight of the slain man, another added to the total of victims of the horror, Dupont again was master. Violet, womanlike, loved him the more in this moment when any word or act or thought of love would have been sacrilege.

"Hurry!" he muttered.

They broke through the underbrush, following the faint suggestion of a trail leading diagonally north toward Broadway. Very suddenly they emerged upon a ledge of rock ten to twelve feet above the level of the street. In the haze of early evening there was revealed, directly before them, two men locked in a struggle. One glance, and both recognized the larger of the figures. The Strangler!

Dupont left her, literally leaping to the walk

below. She scrambled down, watching the fight eagerly as she did so.

Dupont's assistance was unnecessary. The stranger, who seemed to be a ridiculously little man, had no trouble at all in subduing the big ex-sailor. To Violet it seemed inconceivable. Then a further surprise awaited her, for she saw that Dupont knew the man; that they were old friends.

"Bing!" Dupont exclaimed, delighted. And to Violet. "This is Chester Randolph; 'Bing' we call him; member of the Adventurers' Club, and my companion on the African trip."

Randolph bowed, acknowledging Dupont's presentation of Violet. "Pleased, Miss Bronson!" But his interest was in Dupont. "Been trying to find you all day, Bob! Read in the papers on the boat about this mystery of yours and the death of Doctor Sutton; thought you might need some help."

"Good old Bing!" Dupont sobered now as he remembered the task before him. "How did you find me?"

"Easy, when I thought of it. The paper gave the name of the agency employing the detective killed at the medium's place, remember? Anyhow, I went up there and found them sending all their men up here and, well, I gathered there might be trouble. I'm ready!"

Randolph drew a revolver half out of his pocket

to show he was armed. Afterward he indicated his prisoner. The Strangler, sullen, seemed willing enough to await the little man's pleasure rather than to attempt another struggle. "Saw this fellow bursting out of the bushes up there as if he was in a hurry, and so I collared him. Do you want him?"

Dupont smiled grimly. "Yes, for murder. Wasn't—wasn't sure you could handle him alone, though."

Randolph drew himself up, turning to Violet. "No one will ever give me credit," he complained, "just because I'm short and stocky."

"Listen, Bing!" Dupont did not lose sight of his problem for an instant. "You can help a lot. They're after Violet, particularly. Will you take her home and stay there with her, to protect her, until I round up this crew here and join you?"

"Sure! How about this fellow?"

"I'll take him. I've a dozen men around the place."

"Are you armed?"

"No. They nearly got me in there."

"Take my gat, then." Randolph handed over his revolver, after which he allowed a bit of his disappointment to show in his face. "No chance for me to get in on the fight, Bob?"

"Violet's safety is more important."

"Oh, all right!"

Randolph led the way to a little racer at the

curb, helping Violet in. For several moments he watched Dupont march the Strangler off, showing his distaste for his more quiet job very plainly. Finally, shrugging his shoulders philosophically, he clambered in beside the girl, obtaining the address of her home.

She studied him, noticing the easy and skilled poise with which he handled his machine. In the back of her head an idea was forming, gaining strength.

"You—you drive awfully well," she exclaimed, after a moment.

He brightened, showing a susceptibility to flattery. "I prefer to pilot a battle plane," he suggested.

"Oh! You're an aviator; you—you were over seas?"

"Uh-huh! In the thick of it."

She leaned forward coaxingly. "Don't you hate to go away and leave Robert up there to face that gang alone, with only the detectives?"

"You bet!" He slowed the car, half turning to face her.

"You know"—she indicated that he stop at the curb—"I didn't want to go away any more than you did, only I didn't dare try to question Robert's wishes because—well, I never do when he is—is masterful." She colored. "But if you'd like to go back—"

"Now, my dear young lady," interrupted the

little man, "I've promised Bob I'd look after you and—"

"I mean"— she hastened to interrupt in turn —"I mean I'll go back with you, and—and I want to get into the fight too!" Her eyes sparkled now at the thought of facing the danger with the man she loved.

"My dear, dear young lady!" Randolph became patronizing. "My task is to take you away from danger, not into it."

"Listen, Mr. Randolph, please. I've been fighting those horrible people just the same as Robert has. I had a fight with a girl who belongs to the gang, we both used just our hands, and—and I nearly killed her. And—and just a little while ago it was I who rescued Robert from the den and led him out when he was dazed and dizzy. I—I threw the old priest and his altar over and knocked the girl down again, all by myself. I—I can fight!"

"The devil!" Randolph looked at her under the glare of the street lamp, which was brighter now than the daylight. He saw the lines of determination beneath the soft curves of her cheeks and the real bravery underneath the warm enthusiasm of her glance. "Can you shoot?" he asked. "A revolver?"

"Of course!" she lied, calling to mind desperately the instruction Doctor Sutton had given her.

Randolph hopped out and with bustling eagerness unlocked the trunk at the back of his machine. From this, with a grin, he produced a brace of pistols, heavy, rather old-fashioned weapons bought for some big-game expedition.

"They're heavy!" he told her, seeing that both were loaded and allowing her to have her choice.

"Come on!" was all she said. She slumped down in her seat.

XXXV

THE LAST BATTLE

THE last glow of day had faded beyond the Palisades as Violet and Randolph drove up to the entrance of the tiny farm and parked the car just beyond the driveway on the farther side of the street. Together they crossed to the little dirt road, but as they mounted the rise Randolph insisted she drop behind. They made their way three quarters of the distance to the barn without molestation. Then she recognized the voice of a detective, Jake.

"Hey! Stop where you are! I've got you covered."

She rushed forward. "It's all right Jake! This is Mr. Randolph, who's come to help round up the gang."

"Oh! Miss Bronson!" Jake's voice showed his disapproval. "They may shoot," he explained. "You had better drop back."

"What are your orders?" interrupted Randolph, questioning the man.

"One of our operatives has a certain whistle. When he blows it we all rush the house simultaneously."

"How about the secret passage?" queried Violet.

"We've a man at each entrance. No chances now, either." The death of Sam rankled. "They're told to shoot—to shoot anybody, anybody at all they hear coming. That's Mr. Dupont's order."

Very suddenly a prolonged long-toned musical note sounded through the night, echoing softly in the trees and about the house and barn and fields. It was more like the call of a nocturnal bird than a whistle fashioned by man. It was so gently obtrusive that it might have been, to one not listening for it, the distant signal of a boat on the Hudson back of Inwood Hill.

"That's her!" whispered Jake, excitedly, starting forward.

"You hold back," directed Randolph to Violet. "There's no use taking foolish chances. Follow us later. Keep close to the ground now."

With rebellious foolhardiness she waited less than a moment before starting after the two men. Soon she was aware of a slinking figure to her right, crashing through the underbrush which came half around the barn, skirting the house. Something in the caution of that detective, outlined faintly to her in silhouette against the glow of the street arcs below on Broadway, impelled her to adopt a sort of crouch as she crept forward.

Now the squat building of the home itself

loomed up before her, the night sky framing it dimly. She realized that another operative was advancing to her left and she grasped that the investment of the gang's haunt was very complete.

She thrilled at the thought of the fate about to overtake Evil Eye, Renard, Vera Collins, the hunchback, and the others of the band. Murder, torture, primitive brutality—there had been nothing in the realm of crime too dastardly for them if only it suited their purposes. Her own dear Doctor Daddy, and faithful Dacca—even the medium, Mesma, who was only remotely concerned—no one standing in their path had escaped death except Robert and herself.

And Robert! Somewhere in this circle, closing in upon the house like the iris diaphragm of a camera, was the man she loved, directing the operations. With Dupont in charge she knew none of the gang would escape.

But would they fight? Was any danger apt to befall the besiegers of the den? Almost at the moment the thought flitted through her consciousness the sharp bark of a pistol shot broke the stillness. She dropped to the ground instinctively. She raised her own weapon to fire before she realized that two men were in front of her, Randolph and Jake. On knees and elbows, pulling herself forward with a froglike swimming motion, forgetful of her clothes, of the danger, of everything but the excitement of the attack,

she made her way between them as they lay, sheltered, behind a feed trough.

Meanwhile a fusillade of bullets had followed the first shot from the farmhouse, and had been answered by the forces of Dupont. On a small scale it was a very genuine battle.

"You wait here," Randolph whispered suddenly, to both Jake and Violet. "My dad was an Indian fighter. I'll crawl up and get a few of them through the window before they know what's up."

"Nix!" protested Jake. "Nix, you chump. You'll get plugged by some of our men. They're no marksmen, you know."

Randolph was off, paying no attention. Violet, thoroughly excited, started to follow, but Jake, with rather elaborate profane comment under his breath, held her.

The shots died down. There was no indication of Randolph's progress until they saw the flash of his pistol as he held it, at some crevice in window or door. Once, twice, three times he discharged his weapon. There were a few desultory reports from the woods, then all was silence.

Jake hesitated perhaps a half minute. Then again instructing Violet to remain behind, he started up after Randolph. As before, she disobeyed. At first she was cautious, hugging the ground. But when there were no more shots she rose, darting forward recklessly and eagerly.

At the door Randolph and Jake and two others were preparing to break in. She heard the voice of Dupont from the rear. He was assembling some of the men to crash through the back door at the same time. Much as a small boy in her eagerness to miss nothing, Violet pressed close to Randolph and Jake, and the adventurer saw her.

"Ye Gods!" he exclaimed. "Suppose they're there and—"

"Break it in! Break it in!" she urged. "Don't give them a moment to escape, to do anything!"

"Where'd they escape to!" muttered Jake. "The passage is guarded."

"Miss Bronson!" Randolph was worried now. Suppose extraordinary danger should come; suppose she should be hurt. "You simply must go back!"

The low tones of the whistle from the other side of the house interrupted. The men burst through the frail door in the first attempt. Violet was right at their heels.

Inside was the utmost confusion. Furniture, rugs, bedding, everything possible had been impressed in order to form bullet-proof barricades. On the floor were two members of the gang—Dupree, dead and cold; Case, the hunchback, gasping his last.

"I got them! I got the two of them!" boasted Randolph. "Thought I hit a third. Maybe I did!"

Dupont, rushing in from the rear as the back door collapsed, stopped dead in amazement when he saw Violet. Before he could reprimand her she was after him, tugging at his sleeve excitedly.

"Don't let them get away, Robert! Get after them! Get after them!"

To the surprise of the searchers, there was not the sign of any other member of the gang in the place. While Dupont investigated a tiny kitchen and room adjoining, Violet hurried to the opening to the secret passageway. Randolph was near her. She pulled at his coat, urging him to follow; then stole down the steps, very determined, her weapon elevated.

"This—this is very dangerous," protested the little man, facing the darkness.

"You're not afraid?" she asked.

At that he hurried down to join her, the gibe striking home. While he was just below the level of the top, while she suddenly hesitated in the impenetrable darkness with the realization that they must have a torch and that perhaps, after all, Randolph was right, that she was much too adventuresome, there came from above a blinding flash and explosion, sending down even into the narrow, hidden passageway, an amazingly brilliant light. The report of the detonation was not so loud or terrifying as the dazzling glare, like a gigantic flashlight more white, more dazzling than anything she had ever known.

"What—what is it?" she gasped.

"I'll—I'll see," he faltered.

She saw him start up, but after a step he hesitated. She was impatient. She started to push up after, rubbing her eyes from the pain of the blinding glare of a moment before.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "I'm blind!"

At that she gasped. The very same moment a light sprang up behind her. She turned. The little cellar room was illuminated, as with the glow of an ordinary yellow incandescent bulb. She had never dreamed there was electric light here; certainly there had been no sign of it in the house upstairs. This was a mystery.

At a second glance her blood froze. She tried to escape up the steps, but found Randolph in the way. She screamed, in terror.

Advancing toward her was Renard, a grim smile on his face. Behind him was a new opening in the cellar wall. From the tunnel revealed here came the electric glow. Holding the bulb was the shrouded figure she knew as Evil Eye.

Renard seized her, lifted her as easily as the night he had kidnaped her from her room in Nerva's studio. She screamed again. She caught a glimpse of Randolph as he turned on the stair, heard him exclaim that he could not shoot because he could not see. Then she was dragged into this new passageway, realizing that here was

some mode of escape unknown to Dupont, that here were the principal members of the gang, the cyclops priest, the fox, and her own particular enemy, Vera Collins.

Small satisfaction that the servants of the Devil God had dwindled to these three! She wondered if the hunchback's wife was captured, and, too, if the Strangler, a prisoner now, would go to the electric chair. Then all hope ebbed because she understood intuitively that this had been the last battle, that Evil Eye and Renard and Vera would not be caught, that she would not be rescued. She could not understand it, but there appeared before her, like a picture showing clear through the dim outlines of a window, the open stretches of the sea.

Renard dropped her at the feet of Evil Eye. The monster contented himself with holding her wrist, supporting the electric bulb with the other hand. Though his grasp was weak, his physical make-up feeble, there was something about him so horrible that Violet was helpless in his charge.

Vera turned in with Renard, hastily working at the sides of the passageway near the cleverly concealed entrance. Violet understood their purpose when some five to six feet of the tunnel collapsed, blocking the way effectually and possibly preventing the discovery of the underground route at any future time.

Then she was led away. The sides and ceiling

altered in character after some fifty to a hundred feet, and she grasped that this was another of the century-old abandoned drains. It began to slope upward, following the rise of the hill, and at its end another new bit of tunneling struck off at right angles and admitted them, through a carefully constructed trap, to the basement of an unoccupied house halfway up Inwood Hill.

Renard, coming last, bundled up the electric cable. Just outside the old home stood a limousine, its lights out, the cable running to its batteries. There was no chauffeur, so that Violet wondered at their courage in leaving the machine standing unguarded with the telltale wire down into the secret passage.

"You'll have to blindfold her, Vera," remarked the fox. "It's a long drive and I'll have my hands full."

"How about the Strangler and the boat?" she asked.

"The boat's ready but the Strangler's caught."

"Then—"

"We'll stop and lift him out of their hands. Dupont"— a sneer —"Dupont don't need him as much as we do."

Vera affixed the blindfold, not very gently. Her thoughts, however, were not upon Violet.

"Do you think Dupont will follow us?" she asked.

"Never!" Renard was emphatic. "He'll never know where we went, nor how we got there."

"Case knows, and his wife, and Dupree."

"They're dead. I made pretty sure they were; otherwise we'd have to carry them along."

"The Strangler—"

"—don't know a thing except that he's got a boat and that he comes in on a"—Renard laughed; it was genuinely funny to the fox—"on an imaginary split in a big imaginary fortune, and it 'll be imaginary so far as he's concerned. Is he one of us? Does he worship the Devil God?"

The machine started. After some few moments it stopped. Renard and Vera left. Beside her Evil Eye again clutched her wrist. Then the fox and the snake-woman returned. With them was a third person, a heavy, bulky man who climbed in front with Renard. Was it the Strangler?

XXXVI

BEYOND DEATH

IN the little room off the kitchen something soft struck the foot of Dupont as he entered to investigate. Returning to the kitchen for a lighted lamp, he was so faced in reference to the door that his eyes were shielded from the terrific glare of the explosion in the rooms in front. Thinking of Violet, of Randolph, of his men, he rushed out at once, revolver in hand, ready for any emergency.

The altar chamber was a total wreck. Several of the hangings were smoldering, some of the plaster had been blown from the ceiling, while the pedestal of the altar itself was literally melted away by the heat of the great light.

Instantly Dupont understood that this was another trap, another plant of the gang. His first thought was that it presaged an attack. Calling to his forces feverishly, he took count of the casualties, learning that five of the detectives had been blinded, and were helpless, while three, in odd, out of the way places, like himself, had escaped.

Then he saw Randolph's predicament, and thought of Violet, forgotten in just the moment

he prepared against a repetition of the previous fiasco, the incident of the bricks in an earlier haunt of the band.

"Violet!" he called.

"I'm—I'm trying to get my sight back," moaned the adventurer. "She's down there, Bob, and she screamed, just this minute!"

Dupont brushed by the other men, calling to the three detectives to follow, to bring torches. Rushing madly, recklessly, through the secret passageways, he found the guard at one end, with nothing to report. At the other, the operative, one of the best from the agency and the one in whose care he had left the prisoner, was lying unconscious, attacked brutally. The Strangler had disappeared.

Dupont leaned down to examine the man. He was alive, and, furthermore, revealed no marks of throttling. In Dupont's lap he opened his eyes feebly, enough to explain.

"They came from behind, Mr. Dupont," he whispered, with an effort.

"They must have come through the passage," insisted the hypnotist.

"No, they stole up on me from the bushes, a man and a girl."

"A girl? Miss Bronson?"

"No, one of the gang. She—she was worse than the fellow."

On the grass were the cut bonds of the Strangler.

In the soft loam, about the underbrush, were foot-pr nts bearing out the story of the guard. He, fortunately, did not seem to be seriously hurt.

Dupont rushed back through the passage, searching it foot by foot. If two of the gang had come up from the outside, in what manner did they escape from the house? Were there other passages? Even in the basement room he failed to find trace of any other mode of exit. How the survivors of the gang escaped, what became of Violet—these things constituted a problem, a terrible mystery, which brought the perspiration to his face until it stood out in beads and streaking down through the dirt from underground.

He made another search of the house. The soft thing in the tiny room off the kitchen proved to be the body of Lydia. She lay in blood, and was not, as Dupont first thought, a victim of the bullets. In her side, protruding in mute, gruesome evidence, of the nature of her death, was one of the short-handled knives used by Vera Collins. Was Vera the slayer? He was destined never to know.

The other detectives, as they recovered from the glare of the explosion, aided in the search of the premises, the grounds, even the barns and outbuildings. Dupont settled down in the principal room, to think his problem out. With him was Randolph, now able to use his eyes to a slight extent. Before them were the bodies of Case and

Dupree, the victims of the adventurer, caught by Randolph before they dreamed any of the ring of attackers had approached the house closely.

"Bob!" Randolph's voice was very subdued.

"Yes, Bing?"

"This was my fault. She wanted to come, but I shouldn't have stood for it. Now I'm in the mess. I stick with you to the very finish, get that? The very finish!"

Silently Dupont put out a hand, and they clasped. It was the resealing of a friendship, the making of an offensive and defensive alliance.

"Bob!" This was after an interval of thought by both.

"Yes?"

"Can't you use some of those tricks you learned from the savages when we were traveling—some of your hypnotism, or occultism, to learn what they're up to, where they've taken the girl?"

Dupont gazed down at the little hunchback. If only Case were alive! The undersized man had been a remarkable subject. Once before Dupont had actually used the man's mind for his own purposes against the wishes of the very will which dwelt within the mind. Undoubtedly Case knew the plans and preparations. Hypnotized, he would have to give them to Dupont. But Case was dead.

Suddenly, on unaccountable impulse, Dupont leaned forward. It was horrible, but there was

something in the wide-open eyes of the hunchback which seemed to tell him that this former subject was not dead, but was living—yet it was inconceivable. He felt the pulse. There was not the faintest flutter. There was no breathing, no symptoms which any physician would recognize as indicative of life. The body was warm. That was all, and that was easily accountable.

However, something urged the hypnotist. He fixed his gaze upon eyes apparently sightless, and obtained, almost to his terror, the reaction of malice and defiance. Was it wholly a psychic phenomenon?

"Are you Case?" he asked, finally, aloud.

The answer seemed to be spoken within, to echo within the physical confines of his own brain. "I am!"

"Are you alive or dead?" This question he framed mentally, without utterance.

The reply came as before. "I am dead by all human standards. In the astral world I am dying, but am still alive."

"Can you answer my questions?"

"I must if you demand it of me. I do not wish to do so."

"Where is Violet?"

"In the hands of Evil Eye."

"Where is he taking her? Where is she?"

"He is taking her to the Cavern of the Skull, in the temple of the Devil God, at the headwaters

of the Orinoco. Dick Renard and Vera Collins and the Strangler are with Evil Eye. Now are you satisfied? Now will you let me die, free of your control?"

Dupont shuddered. Aloud he muttered, "Violet, I shall follow you to the Orinoco or to the ends of Africa or Asia or of the world itself!"

Deep in his consciousness, replacing the voice of Case, there came the mocking, malignant influence he knew. It spoke in sepulchral tones, which echoed with deep vibrations through space.

"Fool! You know who I am?"

Dupont formed and held the answer in his brain. "The Mystery Mind!"

"You would match your power against the Devil God? You would follow the girl to the Cavern of the Skull?"

"I do not fear and I shall win," was the assertion of the hypnotist.

The Mystery Mind began to laugh. The hollow cadences of mirth grew louder and louder until they rang with thunder peal in Dupont's consciousness. Then they died away like the rumbling of a wave, defeated and vanquished in its attack upon the rocks of a mountain coast.

Dupont came to himself with a start. He glanced at the body of Case. Then he straightened, in surprise, in amazement, in fright. He looked at Randolph, but Randolph had not stirred. Nevertheless, the eyes of the hunchback were closed.

XXXVII

DISSENSION

HER fever's gone!"

"You sure?"

"Feel!"

Violet twisted uncomfortably as a rough, calloused hand rested upon her forehead for a moment. Then she opened her eyes and glanced about with a sort of dull comprehension.

A gentle swaying motion somehow soothed her and revealed to her the fact that she lay on her back in the bottom of a boat of some sort. Overhead the sky, flawless of cloud or scampering wisp of vapor, was crystal blue. At times there intruded the towering overhanging tops of trees, passing slowly across the dome of the heavens, now and then interlacing from two sides to form a natural arch. The passing of this foliage above told her that the boat was in motion.

Hanging from the branches she saw twining growths of vines and mosses, and forest parasites, so that sometimes the sky was shut out from her altogether. Then she sensed a feeling of deep

oppression. It seemed cool and dank, as though some great marsh or swamp were about. Only occasionally was there a glimpse of bird or living creature. One speck, away in the azure heights, given a flashing coat of gold by the sun as it twirled about speculatively, swooped down and hovered over her, disclosed dark and ugly and menacing against the blue, a buzzard. Principally, however, life was represented by the insects.

Untold myriads of tiny flying creatures swarmed everywhere. Dragon flies darted back and forth like so many airplanes, often forming miniature battle squadrons and performing all the evolutions of modern war. In her ears was the constant hum and buzz of the little universe about her, with its faint graduations of tone not unlike an organ, suggesting perhaps an organ whose organist was sleepy as he toyed with his stops.

Her acute discomfort came to her very gradually. First the flies and gnats bothered her the most. As she raised a hand to brush them off she realized her weakness; then as she saw her own palm and fingers her eyes widened in sheer disbelief. Though she was burned nearly black, the settled tan of long exposure in the open, her hand was emaciated, her fingers gaunt and wholly fleshless. She felt of her arms, her face, her body. She was skin and bones.

With an effort she turned on her side; she

raised her head to look about her. The river was narrow and obviously tropical. The dense bending grasses and the gnarled and tangled underbrush were unmistakable. Here and there concentric circles forming and spreading on the scummed surface of stagnant pools near the shore told of the swarming life beneath the water. Stretched at ease in a sunny open space was an alligator. In one of the darkened arched reaches of the stream the shrill shriek of some living thing was carried to her from the somber depths of the trees. Yet the air was crisp and sharp, for all its sultriness. Though this was unquestionably an equatorial section the altitude was high. This was near the headwaters of some great river of the torrid zone.

In the vessel besides herself was Evil Eye, idle, slouched in the stern, shrouded as always in his robes; the Strangler, close by Evil Eye, guiding the course and helping propel the boat with an oar; and Vera and Renard, each swinging paddles in the forward part of the craft. All were burnt black, and were appreciably thinned and hardened. Vera had sacrificed her hair, which was cropped short, and had donned men's garments, a tattered sailor suit. Her feet were bare and calloused, as though feminine shoes had been useless to her, and had been discarded long before. Her blouse hung partly open in front, revealing the development of huge muscles across her shoulders. There

was little about her to indicate her sex. Renard, similarly dressed and coarsened, differed alone in the possession of the torn remains of his shoes. The Strangler, stripped to the waist, was the luxurious physical specimen of the five. Evil Eye's bare knee, protruding through a rent in his cassock, showed him to be as emaciated as Violet, as ill-suited for the trip as she had been.

In a rush of recollections she remembered some of the hardships of the journey, vivid nightmare flashes representing the few times her normal consciousness had broken through the delirium of her fever. Her last coherent thread of memory ended the night they had carried her aboard the little sloop in the Staten Island harbor. Sailing out into the teeth of a gale, she had become violently seasick. She remembered very dimly that Vera had undressed her, had slipped her into the sailor suit in which she now discovered herself, had fastened a life preserver about her, had picked her up and dropped her in a bunk with a mixed expression of amusement and malice.

One picture recurring to her was when she had awakened to find her head reclining in Vera's lap, the snake woman leaning over with a strange incomprehensive impulse of kindness.

"You'd better eat something, little Violet," she had muttered. "You're too plucky not to have a chance to last it out with the rest of us."

For answer Violet had summoned her strength,

reaching up and striking Vera in the face. She had felt nothing but scorn and hate for this other woman. As for herself, she had cared neither whether she lived or died.

Vera had merely smiled. With a heavy spoon she had forced the mouth of Violet. Though the ship was pitching badly, though the smell and splash of the salt spray came in upon them at intervals, the snake woman had fed her victim ruthlessly. Violet, struggling desperately, yet had been grateful for the warmth and taste of the broth.

On another occasion she had witnessed a fight of grim intensity between the Strangler and Renard, Vera aiding the fox as she could. The Strangler had stolen the map of the treasure. Renard had demanded its return. For nearly an hour the conflict had raged in the little cabin, until Evil Eye, waking, had stopped it by some exercise of his power of will. The Strangler, however, had refused to return the portrait, to reveal its hiding place. Because he had been needed to navigate the ship the gang had been helpless against him.

Then Violet recalled a momentary episode in a sunlit bay somewhere in the tropics, with the sloop at anchor. She had returned to consciousness to find the Strangler bending over her, the expression in his eyes which had terrified her in the back room of the Portola long before.

"Play my game, little girl," he had urged,

striving to make his voice soft and persuasive. "You'll be all right now, but pretend you are still out of your head and you and I'll go up the river together and get the treasure. They mean to kill you up there. I—"

He had paused, leaning closer, drawing his repulsive face closer to hers as though to kiss her. She had tried to raise an arm, to strike him, to ward him off, only to discover that he had pinned her down. In defiance, for all her terror, she had spit at him. He had struck her. She remembered no more.

For a brief instant she had returned to consciousness in a motor boat headed up a great, wide river. But she had been helpless in her weakness, whether from the fever or lack of nourishment she could not now guess. Crawling up toward her face, already upon her bare skin at the neck of her sailor blouse, had been a huge tarantula. She had been helpless against it. The picture in her memory was altogether too vivid for it to be some disordered fancy. She had watched it until it crawled up beneath the shelter of her chin. She had felt it mount her jaw. In fascinated horror she had watched it appear over her mouth, had felt the first touch of its hairy foreleg on her lip. Then something within her had snapped and consciousness had fled from her once more.

The waterfalls, the cascades! The little party

must have climbed many miles of the river's rise during her unconscious periods. Several times she had come to herself to form brief, flashing pictures, of great leaping masses of water and towering heaps of rock, of dense foliage and tropical growths banked against the outlying sentinels of mountain chains. Always Vera and Renard had been carrying the frail boat, desperately heavy in the ascent to the next navigable section of the stream. Always Evil Eye had followed in his robes, a strange figure in this equatorial land, as feeble in his movements as some cowled palmer at the end of a pilgrimage. Always she had found herself in the arms of the Strangler, alone strong enough for the burden. Always she had struggled, sensing the gloating within him at her close presence, kicking, biting, clawing, until he had subdued her, cruelly, by blows and the exercise of brute strength.

Now the river was narrow. The sun was low. Soon they must seek a landing. Some one had said her fever was gone. Perhaps she would be able to retain her faculties, to nurse her strength, to sharpen her inspiration, to devise and scheme and plan some way of eluding them, some way to escape back to civilization and Robert. Very suddenly the love of life returned to Violet. That was the surest indication of her recovery.

Vera was first to notice that she had turned, was resting on her side.

"Well!" It was surprise. Then perhaps because all had shared the rigors of the journey together Vera displayed the slight impulse toward friendship once more. "Feel better, Violet?" she asked.

In Violet's mind nothing could ever efface the picture of the snake woman as she had revealed herself, cold, unscrupulous, a taker of human life. The girl dropped back to the bottom of the boat, closing her eyes wearily, making no attempt to answer.

After some time they thought her asleep. Probably leaning over toward Renard, Vera engaged him in low-toned conversation.

"Does the Strangler know the lake is the end of the water trip?" she asked.

"I think he suspects it."

"Then we'd better get him before he gets us."

"Right," rejoined the fox. "The night we land."

There was a cautious pause. By and by Vera resumed.

"How about Violet, here?"

"Evil Eye received orders to bring her to the Cavern of the Skull."

"Who'll carry her?"

"Won't she be able to walk—if the fever's over?"

"Perhaps."

Violet thought that she remained awake to

listen to any further conversation. But all at once she sensed a change. Opening her eyes, raising herself cautiously, she grasped that a night had passed, or maybe many of them. This was morning and they were upon the placid surface of a great, spreading lake. In the distance were the towering peaks of the Sierra Parime. At the fringes of the water was a darker color of foliage and a suggestion of open forest clear of tropical underbrush. This seemed to be a gigantic plateau. There was, in the air, the balminess of a temperate climate. Later she knew that she was at the actual headwaters of the Orinoco, high in the tablelands of South America.

In another moment she discovered that she was in the other end of the boat, another proof of the passage of time. Evil Eye rested far forward, as though to pick out the place for their landing, in the distance. Vera and Renard paddled as before, while the Strangler, in the stern, guided them with his oar. Violet, lying on a rude couch made by a tarpaulin spread over the supplies, was directly at his feet.

Seeing that her eyes were open, he leaned forward, whispering:

"You'd better play my game!"

She shook her head vigorously and fearlessly.

"I have the map of the treasure, and—"

He stopped as Vera glanced back. She saw that Violet was herself, that the Strangler had

been talking to her.' A significant glance passed between the snake woman and Renard. He, in turn, leaned forward, speaking in a low tone to Evil Eye.

For the greater part of the day they made their way across the great lake. In time Evil Eye fixed a point, a gaunt, lone pine, mounted sentinel-like upon a bare crag of black rock at the entrance to a little bay. Violet was able to see now that the land at the shore was dry and that the country was primeval forest for the better part. This was far above the rubber country, probably inland, beyond the most ambitious explorations of white men. Only her father and Stuart Steele had penetrated to these haunts of the head hunters. Here, somewhere, must be hidden the treasure which had cost her father his life, Stuart Steele his honor and manhood. In those bleak ranges ahead was the Cavern of the Skull—if such a temple had any existence, in fact. The long journey was about completed.

Evil Eye indicated a beach at the farther end of the little bay as their goal. The Strangler steered a course skirting closely the bald-faced shoulder of rock with the skeleton tree above. Violet was conscious of a growing tension between the members of the band, between the three forward, on the one hand and the lone, bulking sailor, behind her on the other. As they came close to the shore she felt the imminency of some happen-

ing, she could not tell just what. She did catch another significant glance between Vera and Renard, she heard a sharp intake of breath from the man with the guiding oar, which meant that he had caught it also.

At that moment there rose over the still waters of the huge lake a strangely familiar sound that she failed utterly to identify until she caught the speck against the sky. An airplane.

Her first thought was that, after all, they had not been able to penetrate the wilds to a point out of touch with civilization. She wondered what her father would have thought, and Stuart Steele, and Doctor Sutton, to have heard the distant rumble of this modern-winged mechanism, to have watched it rise from the forest beyond and come mounting over them above the still blue of the water.

Her second thought was the realization that no flyer would approach these inner reaches of South America, no aviator would mount to the very backbone of the continent, without a definite reason. This could be no transandean flight, taking place this far to the north. Unquestionably some particular quest brought the plane to this tableland.

Was it Robert? She thrilled at the possibility. She knew that Dupont would never give up the attempt to find and rescue her. She knew that if he suspected she was here he would follow.

Certainly no allies of the band of Evil Eye would arrive in this fashion.

As the machine rose and arrived overhead it remained high, so that she could not distinguish the figures. But evidently the boat was seen. The aviator circled around and around, much as a buzzard locating its prey. Then he executed a nose dive almost upon them, righting himself, and sweeping, like the dive of an eagle, over to some point beyond the trees, beyond the beach which Evil Eye had indicated.

The others in the boat were plainly perturbed. Vera and Renard leaned over to talk with Evil Eye in low tones. The Strangler, smiling, rose quickly, but cautiously, balancing himself with the oar. Then he inserted the oar in the inner supports of the frail craft, mastlike, so that it would be a lever. Throwing himself to one side suddenly, against the oar, he succeeded in capsizing the boat, with all in it, flinging them into the water without warning.

Violet sank deep, feeling the chill of the cold water quickly, unable to exert any amount of strength after her long illness and lack of nourishment. For some moments she thought she might not rise at all. Her lungs had been deflated and she had barely been able to close her mouth to avoid swallowing water. Thin, emaciated, the lake was slow to grasp her and raise her to the surface.

Then as she emerged, gasping, choking for

breath, she felt her weakness keenly. Her arms were lead, her muscles helpless from disuse. She caught one glimpse of the inhospitable rocks; sharp, rough, not twenty yards away, and every bit of hope ebbed from her. Again she felt she was about to sink. She made a frantic, despairing effort.

Suddenly a strong arm seized hers, a hand slipped to her waist, and she felt herself flung over the shoulder of a swimmer. Immediately he started off, and she was so held that she could neither protest nor assist. She felt the powerful strokes of the man's limbs beneath her, the capable rhythmic forward drive of his body as she rested secure upon his back. He was only using one arm, yet he made remarkable speed in the still water.

She was being saved, yet she shuddered. She knew it was the Strangler, she knew she would be helpless in his power.

As though to seek help from Renard or Vera, as though there were a choice of fates, she glanced behind. The lithe, slim figure of Vera she caught clinging to the boat, striving to right it. Renard was supporting Evil Eye and put to it to do so.

The Strangler, rather than trying the difficult feat of climbing the sharp, storm-washed, treacherous rocks, was swimming directly for the shore and the forest. Once Violet attempted to break away from him, to slip his grasp. He brought

her to submission so quickly and so viciously that she yielded without further thought of crossing his will.

On the shore he turned to her.

"You're mine now, by right of conquest, by right of carrying you up and around every waterfall between the coast and these mountains. I'm going to have you. If necessary I shall break your will by force, or—or even kill you. Understand?"

She nodded helplessly. She watched him as he squatted and ripped his sodden trousers, taking the map, the portrait of Steele, from the tattered leg where he had sewn it for safe keeping. Then as he spread it out on his knees, looking at it gloatingly, for all that he did not understand it, something of her old spirit wakened in Violet. This was the piece of canvas for which she had risked so much. This was the secret, in some way, for which her father had suffered. Should this gangster, this bruiser, this bully of the sea, this murderer, possess it?

Though she could hardly stand, she picked up a heavy rock with both hands and stole behind him in her bare feet. Believing her subdued, he gave her no attention. She raised the stone and with a gigantic effort brought it down upon his head.

He crumpled up without a sound. Then she was frightened. She leaned over. He was breathing, but unconscious. She tried to pull the portrait

from his hands, but his grasp, even in his state of coma, was too tight for her. She dared not linger. Without a backward glance she fled into the forest. She had no idea of direction or destination. Her sole thought was to escape from him. To protect her wasted little body she had nothing but a sailor suit of cheapest materials, half rotted by its wettings, by its days and weeks upon her without a change. Her feet were bare and had not been hardened, as had Vera's. Her hair was snarled and matted to her head, untouched by comb or even human hand since the fight at the farm on Inwood Hill. Her illness had left her hopelessly weak, so that now, as she ran, propelled by fear and panic, her eyes clouded and were covered with a film. Not once but many times she ran directly into obstacles, only to turn and run madly forward in a slightly different direction.

She maintained her flight, unreasoningly, unthinkingly, until her limbs collapsed beneath her. On the soft bed of fallen leaves she sobbed for several moments, clinging to her cut and bruised feet; then sleep came to her and brought relief.

She woke with the realization it was another day. In the forest a deep silence lent a sense of its calm to her. She rose, glancing about. Now there came thoughts of the danger from wild beasts, or even the untamed black dwellers of the table-land. She had slept, unmolested, on the

open ground. As the wonder of that struck her it seemed as if she heard her name called. With out thinking, she answered.

"Yes, Robert! I'm coming!"

There had been no voice, no sound from him. Could it be possible that he was here, present in these woods? With a sort of uncanny prescience afterward beyond explanation to her, she started running. Her course was as unerringly straight as if guided by a compass. As she ran she repeated over and over again, aloud:

"Yes, Robert! I'm coming!"

XXXVIII

QUICKSANDS

"THEY'LL head for the strip of beach," remarked Randolph, the moment the plane came to a stop in a natural clearing he selected for a landing. "That's not more than a quarter of a mile through the trees right back of here."

Dupont was shaking. His teeth were chattering. He could hardly rise from the observer's seat after his trembling hands unfastened the strap.

"I saw her!" he exclaimed, wildly. "I saw Violet through the glass. I recognized her hair. I knew her by the way she used her hands."

Randolph drew himself up rather proudly. "I told you! I told you that if we patrolled the river from the air, made careful inquiries up and down, it would be impossible for that gang to slip through our hands."

On wabbling legs Dupont started for the fringe of forest at the edge of the clearing. After long weeks of fearful uncertainty and almost daily

flights he had obtained the first glimpse of the girl he loved, the first clue to her actual whereabouts. From his point of observation in the sky he had counted the figures in the little boat. He had picked out Evil Eye by his black cassock, had guessed at the identity of the massively built Strangler. At first the three other tiny humans below had puzzled him. But suddenly Vera had betrayed herself, in spite of her sailor garb, by characteristically feminine movements, as the five of them showed their interest in the airplane. Realizing that Violet must also be in man's clothes, he identified the prone figure when the girl put a hand to her head with a certain little distinctive mannerism. The fifth, of course, was Renard.

Although Dupont ran ahead, Randolph caught him, and together the friends broke through the woods toward the little bay. Here and there fallen logs blocked their progress. While the underbrush was not dense, it consisted of an interweaving of vines and shrubbery rather difficult to traverse. Randolph's estimate of a quarter mile was short of the actual distance four times over. Fully half an hour elapsed before they reached the beach, pausing cautiously, but eagerly, in the shade of the forest to study the expanse of water and shore before them.

On the bay there was not the slightest sign of life. Dupont took his glass, sweeping the surface

again with minute care. Finally he made a painstaking survey of the shore line from the rocky crag jutting into the lake to the sand where they stood.

"They'd land on this side sure," deduced Randolph. "It's quite a bit more paddling to the promontory and the farther end of the bay. If they tried it I doubt they would make it before we got here."

Dupont handed him the binoculars. "You look, Bing! I'm still trembling."

Randolph repeated the careful examination of water and land. "They guessed we were after them," he hazarded, finally. "They probably made right for shelter and hid the boat."

Dupont drew and inspected his revolver. "Let's skirt the shore, keeping under cover and looking for footprints or other signs."

"I"—Randolph hesitated—"I think we ought to hurry back to the plane, Bob. We left it unguarded. If anything happens to that we're gone. No food, no supplies, not even a boat to get back if we do rescue Violet."

Dupont was impatient, knowing his companion was right. But an inspiration came to him suddenly.

"I'll go alone, Bing! You hurry to your plane. If they attack you take the air and don't come down until you see me in the middle of the clearing. I'll join you by night. If I don't return

by then you hurry to the rubber station where you have lights for a night landing, and arrange to be back with help by daybreak."

The adventurer, dubious, finally acquiesced. Dupont heard him hurrying over the trail which they had broken through the trees. Then the hypnotist, conquering his excitement as he settled to his task, began the arduous work of threading the fringe of the forest so as to see and yet not be seen, in that manner skirting the bend of the bay toward the lake.

Occasionally he stopped to use his glass. He kept his weapon in hand; he sought to keep every faculty alert, so as to avoid surprise. Twice he paused for a full five minutes to listen to the sounds of the wood. Perhaps an hour passed without result. In that time he covered the distance almost up to the rocks which marked his farther goal.

All at once he saw before him in a little clearing above a tiny strip of beach the form of a man crumpled up and evidently unconscious. At second glance he recognized the Strangler. He stopped dead, in suspicion and distrust, wondering just how to account for the presence of this one of the band, unable to understand the absence of the others, the lack of some sign of their whereabouts.

In his travel in the tropics he had learned to place reliance upon his sense of hearing, un-

usually acute for a civilized white. When no sound came to him other than the normal noises of the solitude he stepped into the open cautiously, approaching the unconscious figure. Leaning over, he discovered that the Strangler was living, was breathing naturally. He found the abrasion upon the man's head where the blow had struck. Then before his startled glance was revealed, clutched firmly in the two hands of the man, the portrait of Stuart Steele which contained the map to the secret treasure of the devil worshipers. Hardly willing to credit his eyes, he started to unclasp the death-like lock of the fingers. As he did so some faint distant murmur caught his ear, warning him. He slipped back into the shelter of the trees quietly.

After some time Renard and Vera appeared from the further side of the open space. Immediately he wondered at the whereabouts of Violet and Evil Eye. He determined to watch and shadow this pair.

Renard he would have recognized at once, but Vera was so changed that he was less ready to credit her here as a woman than he had been through his glass from the airplane. Both saw the Strangler at once. They rushed to the man and in an instant detected the canvas in his grasp. No scruples seemed to actuate the couple, for Renard, taking a knife from the pocket of his tattered trousers, forced the fingers of the

unconscious gangster. Vera rolled the picture, attempting to slip it into her blouse, but at the demand of Renard she surrendered it to him and helped him tie it about his waist, next to his skin and beneath his clothes.

The painting hidden, Renard turned to the Strangler, kicking him viciously. Vera, glancing around, suddenly exclaimed aloud, pointing with one hand at Dupont's footmarks, clutching Renard's arm with the other.

"Look! Shoes! New shoes!"

"From the airplane," the fox muttered, loud enough so that Dupont heard.

Vera whispered something to her companion, then ran swiftly back into the woods in the direction from which the two had come. Neither of them had glanced toward Dupont. He felt safe; he decided that for the moment they did not intend to follow his trail. Since he could not circle the clearing swiftly enough to pursue Vera, he remained to watch Renard.

The fox made several attempts to rouse the Strangler. He cuffed the head of the man, knocking it from side to side. He kicked the unconscious form again and again. Meanwhile the minutes passed.

Suddenly Dupont caught a breath behind him, but too late. Slim arms of steel locked his, and Vera's voice, triumphant, called to her companion in the clearing.

"Made it! Made it! Come on and tie him, and remember his eyes!"

He was bound with torn bits of the Strangler's clothing. Though he struggled, he found the girl's strength above anything he had ever known, and it was useless. These two devotees of the Devil God, who had carried a heavy boat around every waterfall and rapids upon more than a thousand miles of the upper unnavigable Orinoco, bore him without an effort for nearly two hours.

At a sandy island in the broad delta of a minor stream emptying into the lake Evil Eye was waiting. Out in the open sun stakes had been driven, and a huge gourd affixed on uprights in a fashion Dupont could not understand. The preparations were not fresh, for the sand had drifted and the wood dried as though from several seasons.

Without audible direction from Evil Eye the other two placed Dupont upon his back on the ground, lashing arms and ankles and head so that any movement was impossible. Then the old priest went to the river and with a bit of Indian basketwork filled the gourd, which now was directly above the hypnotist's head. In an instant the victim understood. The water torture!

A drop fell upon his forehead, somehow comforting and cooling in the heat of his exposed position. After an interminable interval another drop fell in the same spot. Now it was no discomfort. But before the dried shell above would

empty itself he would be driven insane; then death would follow. The constant repetition of the slow deliberate dripping of the water on one certain spot was fatal to a living being.

"Evil Eye was preparing that for the Strangler," Vera volunteered, bending over, still enjoying the memory of her single-handed capture. "We'll be back with him by the time you're through."

Dupont heard the echo of their departing footsteps in the sand beneath his head. He began to calculate, mentally, the chances he had for life. He blessed the fact that he was tied out in the open, so that Randolph would see him from above. He wondered if he could last until morning.

All at once he realized that he still possessed the power to outwit his enemies. He remembered his demonstrations before the assembled physicians in the Philadelphia hospital. While he had never hypnotized himself, he had no fear but that he could influence his own nervous system enough to counteract the shock of this torture. There remained the effort to strengthen the skin and flesh upon his forehead by an exercise of will. Such a thing had never been done, but conceivably it was as possible as controlling the blood supply and nerve force in an unfamiliar subject.

The sun struck low, then set, and the damp of night rose from the lake and enveloped him as he fought to neutralize the effects of the tantalizingly slow drops of water. Toward dawn he

felt himself weakening, yet he persevered. They never had beaten him! They never would!

Just for one brief moment his self-control deserted him. He became delirious, calling, framing audibly the name of the girl he loved.

"Violet! Violet!"

Then his mind cleared and an amazing phenomenon followed. He heard her answer, clear, unmistakable, not to be confused with the figment of his delirium.

"Yes, Robert! I'm coming!"

His keen ears caught the fall of her bare feet on the sand, the gentle splash as she hurried through the shallow water toward the delta. She had seen him by now. She would rescue him. They would be together again after the terrible weeks of their separation. But suddenly the sounds of her coming ceased. There was an instant of vibrant silence. Following was her voice again, this time raised in terror.

"Robert! Robert! I'm sinking! I'm in quicksands!"

XXXIX

A FIRE IN THE NIGHT

WITH full realization of the peril to Violet, Dupont strained and struggled until the bonds at his wrists wore through his skin and into the flesh, until the band over his face seemed to swell and hold him even more firmly to the ground.

Another drop of water upon his forehead caused him to quiver and vibrate with pain. Now that he knew the girl—within hearing, but out of sight, within reach, but beyond help—was sinking into the treacherous quicksands, his concern for himself was forgotten. The iron grip upon his own nerves was relaxed. The strength and power of his mind was no longer bent toward resistance to the torture. He lay helpless, frightened. His fear was not for himself, but now that he was afraid he suffered as the savage designers of the ordeal desired their victims to suffer. A second drop of water sent a thrill of agony through every nerve fiber in his body. The tips of his fingers, even the ends of his toes, burned as though touched with liquid fire.

"Robert! Robert!" Her cry now had mounted to a scream.

In this moment the voice of a third person, in reassuring tones, told of their rescue.

"All right!" It was Randolph, calm as always. "I'm coming!"

He caught the hand of the girl· then he cut the hypnotist loose.

Dupont found himself tremendously weakened by his night spent lashed to the sand. Violet's strength had long been a thing of the past. But both were so determined to pursue their enemies, to recover the portrait, to punish Evil Eye and his associates, that the counsel and advice of Randolph to hurry toward the coast was utterly disregarded.

They learned that their predicament was worse than they anticipated. The adventurer explained, with a rather rueful expression, that he had smashed the airplane hopelessly the night before. The ground of the clearing was unusually rough, its greatest length just barely sufficient for a rise, while the wind at the time of his attempt to ascend was blowing across instead of down the narrow space, and so of no use to him. But he had salvaged the few supplies. They had food for perhaps three days. There were two revolvers, with plenty of ammunition.

Dupont retraced the path threaded by Vera and Renard the day before, locating the tiny

open space where he had found the unconscious Strangler. The gangster had disappeared, however, and there were no traces of footprints in the fringe of forest immediately about, or upon the wind-swept surface of moss and roots and matted leaves which constituted the shore for some distance beyond the strip of beach in either direction.

"What next?" asked Randolph. The little man was very chastened by the accident to the airplane; his attitude suggested that he felt at fault even for the lack of tangible evidence of the band's whereabouts.

Dupont took the glass which Renard and Vera had neglected to unsling from his shoulder when they lashed him to the sand. He began a careful inspection of lake and bay, of shore and woods; he even swept the distances over the trees for any sign of smoke.

Violet dropped to the ground, clasping her feet. There were tears in her eyes from the pain. Randolph saw her, and immediately insisted upon offering his own boots; in fact, began to unlace them.

She smiled, wistfully. "They'll be so awfully big!" she protested.

"No!" He grinned. "I've got little feet. I'm a little man, you know, even if I am strong and husky." He collected dried moss to pad the extra space about each foot, and he tore a sleeve from his shirt to make bandages for the worst of the

cuts and bruises, first making her bathe them in the clear, fresh water, of the lake. "I used to go barefoot a lot," he added, when she still seemed unwilling to don the boots.

Dupont finished his inspection visibly disappointed. Then he brightened.

"They were going to bring the Strangler out for the same torture they gave me," he explained. "There will be footprints in that sand."

Violet shuddered, remembering her own experience at the delta. Randolph insisted that they hurry to the clearing first to pack up the meager supply of food and to prepare to carry it upon their backs.

"If some one stumbles upon that we surely are out of luck," he remarked.

For all his assurances to Violet of the hardiness of his feet the adventurer walked with a gingerly step which brought grim smiles to the faces of both the others. Violet herself made her way with difficulty, due to the pain, but the stout leather gave her support and protection, shielding her nearly to the knees, and there meeting the torn edges of her trouser legs.

The sun was nearly at the meridian when they reached the delta once more. Dupont, less worn than the barefooted Randolph, stole out to search for footmarks in the sand.

He identified those of Vera and Renard and Evil Eye from the day before; he traced the

arrival of Violet and Randolph and the departure of the three of his own party back in the direction of the lake. There were no additional prints.

Violet insisted that they rest and eat, and led them to a sheltered spot in the woods where they could watch the delta in case Evil Eye and his companions should return. While she fussed with the contents of their packs, womanlike, determining just how to ration and divide the food for Randolph's estimated three days, the adventurer achieved the ascent of a tall tree in his bare feet, Dupont's glass slung from his shoulder. From a vantage point in the very top he studied the lake at his back, the level stretch of forest leading to the mountains behind, and the rises and breaks in the hills themselves. After a while he slid to the ground. His confident manner had returned to a considerable degree.

"I know quite a bit about the general contour of a country," he began. "It was my specialty in the service and I was the best scout in my squadron when it came to doping the lay of the land. Now"—he sprawled out comfortably, facing them —"this small creek before you seems to head right into a pass in the mountains behind us. The trees are just a little denser and there is here and there a splotch of very green green, which means water, and lets me trace the course of the stream. I don't see any signs of any other river or rivulet within miles in either direction. Your man Evil

Eye was aiming straight for the bay below here, and if there is a Cavern of the Skull back in the mountains, it must be near this stream."

"They said they were going to land at that beach in the bay," volunteered Violet.

"See!" exclaimed Randolph.

Dupont frowned, not quite understanding. "Why should the Cavern of the Skull be near the stream?"

"Because everything up here was built by primitive man, or found by primitive man. Devil worshipers are not civilized engineers. Man in his early estate was dependent upon water where he found it, and he stayed near it. You always find signs of primitive man near water; you know that."

Dupont nodded. "Of course!"

"My idea," Randolph hurried on, "is to follow this stream back toward the hills. It's a good day's trip, in any case. Then, at night, I'll get a big tree and climb up with the glass again and watch for a fire. The chances are ten to one your crew will build a fire at their camp."

"Are you sure they've gone inland, toward the Cavern of the Skull?" Violet asked. "Isn't it possible they are still about?"

"Why should they remain here?" Dupont rejoined. "They have no reason to believe I have escaped. They probably suppose I was alone in the airplane; they may even have found it in

the clearing, wrecked. The body of the Strangler is gone, which undoubtedly means they have taken him."

"They haven't recaptured me," she insisted.

Randolph replied to that. "They could hardly expect to find you in this expanse of forest. They will suppose that you will starve or become the prey of some wild beast or even of the head hunters. They know you have been very sick and are weak."

After the lunch the little party began its long trip in toward the mountains. At times the stream widened and its banks, broad and low, gave them ample room to walk abreast on soft level turf. Again it became narrow with precipitous banks of spongy undergrowth and twisted tangled vines and brush. Then Dupont took the lead, breaking the way, followed by Violet and Randolph in turn.

Both men were careful to watch for signs of the other party, but until well in the afternoon there was neither hint nor sound nor subtle sense that any but these three were to be found in all the broad expanse of this wilderness. It became hot and dry and uncomfortable. Still they drove forward, hoping to make the first rise of the foothills by dark.

Finally they came upon a clearing, a depression in the general slope of the table-land, and here the stream split, flowing in two channels straight

through a considerable section of spongy marsh. The ground between the twin strands of water seemed more solid than the grass, so they crossed. As they walked cautiously in the low warm light of the sun, which was barely above the mountain tops in the west now, they discovered a deposit of sand where the little river first divided upon its drop into the open space. Immediately before them were footprints. One pair of smaller ones belonged to a woman, a white woman. Three others, male, were clearly distinguishable.

"The Strangler's with them, walking," muttered Dupont.

Encouraged, elated, they drove forward with new strength and energy. The sun dropped and splashed the peaks with golden fire. The conflagration in the sky died down and the glow following faded to the dull tints of twilight. Then when there was just about enough light to see the ground before them, the stream curved with an even wide sweep, creating a beach of dark silt as smooth as though some gigantic iron had passed across it. Here again were footprints, but different, with spreading toes and flat arches which Randolph recognized almost immediately.

"Head hunters!" he gasped. "Into the stream! Let us not leave a trail for them to follow."

From the marks, there was quite a party. Dupont counseled the selection of a camp while it was possible to pick a defensible position, and in

this the adventurer concurred. The men examined their weapons, refusing Violet a fire. Rather quietly the three ate another light cold meal.

After dark Randolph mounted a tree, hoping to gain a sight of the fire which he was sure their quarry would kindle. Violet, glancing toward Dupont with sudden shyness, crept toward him and snuggled into his arms in the gloom. It was their first embrace; their first kiss. Yet there was nothing unusually demonstrative in the contact. Her remark, the only word spoken, was essentially feminine.

"It—it don't seem right to be in your arms in—in trousers, Robert!"

He laughed, but held her very close.

Randolph scrambled down from above abruptly.

"Located them!" he whispered, gleefully. "There's a fire, right ahead. It stands out like a queen's jewel in the night. They don't dream anyone's following them."

The adventurer now took the lead, followed by the hypnotist, with Violet last. Occasionally Dupont heard a muttered oath as the man ahead of him struck something with unprotected feet, but Randolph was too full of the excitement of the chase to pay attention to minor hurts.

From an hour and a half to two hours was required to reach the camp of Evil Eye. When the first glow from the fire was apparent through the

trees they proceeded with extreme caution. Finally Dupont, because he was shod, stole forward alone, leaving Randolph with Violet while he reconnoitered.

When he reached a point of observation he dropped flat to the ground. Then he became aware of an astounding fact. Before him were the four they had followed, but with them were the head hunters. To the savages Evil Eye seemed to be some sort of high priest, or even god. The monster had thrown back the cowl of his cassock, revealing the gleaming, single eye, in his misshapen head, with all its hideousness. There was something horrible in the empty sockets where normal eyes should have been. All the head hunters were prostrate, while Renard and Vera sat with heads averted, unable, even after months of association, to face the priest of the Devil clan unveiled.

In the very middle of the circle of light was the Strangler, strapped to a stake. The fire was built in a ring around him. Evil Eye was intoning his instructions, mixing them with explanations and incantations, gesturing now and then toward the helpless gangster. Dupont understood some of the dialect here and there. He grasped enough to send him hurrying back to his companions.

"The Strangler meets his death as a sacrifice to the Devil God," he muttered, "and I guess he deserves it. At least we can't afford to try to

save him. But"—he lowered his voice unconsciously and became excited—"there's some poor devil up ahead of here, a missionary or a prospector or something, and Evil Eye is telling them that he, too, must be a sacrifice. He's unprotected, and they're going after him before dawn."

"You mean—" Randolph caught the fever of Dupont's excitement.

"I mean we ought to go to his rescue; that is, if Violet—"

She rose. "Of course! Come on! Hurry!"

It was necessary to make a wide circuit, away from the stream, through the virgin forest, in absolute darkness. Randolph took the lead, as the better woodsman, guiding their course in a semicircle around the dim glow from the distant camp fire.

After half an hour they heard sudden cries in a deep male voice, unrestrained cries of terror and pain. Gradually the pitch of the man's voice mounted until it became a shrill scream. Then there was silence, deep and somehow terrifying. Another fifteen minutes brought them back to the little waterway, making their further course comparatively easy and comfortable.

As they reached the banks of the creek the faint wind brought a terrible stench up the surface of the water. Violet coughed.

"What's—what's that awful smell?" she asked.

Dupont nudged Randolph so that the adven-

turer would not tell her. The hypnotist did not wish the incident to linger in her memory. He hoped that she would not guess. It was the odor of burning flesh, however. It told of the fate of the Strangler, the fate from which they must rescue the unknown farther ahead of them in the foothills of the mountains.

By the luminous hands of Randolph's watch it was just past midnight. This was Port of Spain time. The adventurer decided that their destination would be not more than a three hours' journey through the blackness of the night; that they should attempt to cover the ground at somewhat faster rate than the head hunters, who would follow them.

The strain was hardest on Randolph because of his bare feet. Violet stumbled forward with the greatest of difficulty. Dupont felt an overmastering fatigue grasping at his muscles, at his brain, at his very purpose. Yet the three kept on. There was a man's life to save; at the same time there were the head hunters to fight, their old enemies to capture, a portrait to be regained.

After something over two hours an open space broke before them unexpectedly. Randolph made the discovery that it had been cleared by the hand of man; that a rude log cabin hovered in the impenetrable shadow of the forest. They rushed to the door, and Dupont, with the butt of his revolver, pounded upon the panels vigorously.

Finally a light sprang up within. They heard a voice, somewhat apprehensive, in Spanish.

"Yes! What is it? Who is it?"

Dupont answered. "Friends, señor! We come to warn you of danger! Open quickly!"

The heavy bar within was taken down and the door was opened to reveal, in the light of a lamp, the full-bearded figure of a prospector, stooped, gray, somewhat nervous at this intrusion; a man easily in his fifties. In the cabin was a rude cot, a table and chair hewn from logs, and the mining tools which told Dupont the occupation of their host and his probable purpose in these unexplored wilds.

"Come—come in!" he exclaimed, still in Spanish.

Then he looked at his guests. Both Randolph and Dupont were unshaven and grimy with dirt. Yet their skin was white, with only the tan of the sportsman. Their clothes, despite the adventurer's bare and bloody feet, were of obviously good quality, not meant for roughing it for months at a time in the open, not showing signs of the almost impossible journey up from the coast.

Violet made an even more incomprehensible figure. Her hair was hopelessly matted upon her head, a disgrace to the coiffure of an aborigine. She was burned black in the sun. Her skin was hard from exposure and dirt. The leather boots of the aviator were in strange contrast with the

torn, shrunken remnants of the sailor suit, barely covering her. At first glance she might have been a savage youth. All her soft, feminine curves, had disappeared in the long weeks behind her; even her mouth had developed a superficial masculine firmness.

The prospector studied the men first, dismissing Violet from his thoughts in the initial casual glance. After some hesitation he smiled, addressing Dupont.

"You appear English to me," he remarked, dropping into that language.

"I am!" The hypnotist grinned. "My name is Robert Dupont, Dr. Robert Dupont. I am a physician in the United States, in New York, specializing in the new science of the mind; hypnotism, you know. I—I have traveled considerably in tropical America and Africa, studying the negro superstitions. This is my friend, Chester Randolph, who has been with me on some of my trips."

A certain barely perceptible eagerness disturbed the calm of the old man as he barred the door behind them. "Did you—did you ever become acquainted with Dr. James Sutton of New York?"

"Doctor Sutton?" Dupont beamed. "Why, I owe everything to him. He practically gave me my career. He"—pausing—"Why do you ask?"

"I knew him," the prospector stated, simply.

There was a certain puzzling reticence about him. As yet he had not reciprocated Dupont's introduction, nor acknowledged the friendly nod of Randolph. He turned to Violet, gazing at her as if unable to fathom something vaguely familiar about this slim companion of the men. "Are you a boy or a girl?" he asked, finally.

"Girl!" She attempted to courtesy, in a sudden impulse of impishness encouraged by his decidedly frank scrutiny, but her trousers were too tight.

He walked over to her slowly, taking her by the arms and leading her to the light. She felt a sense of resentment, but at the same time her intuition held her breathless, trembling, unable to understand a deep, wonderful thrill which went through and through her at his touch.

"What—what is your name?" he demanded.

"Violet Bronson!"

He swept her to his arms with bearlike strength. She could not protest, could not analyze a surge of fright—or was it joy—sweeping over her. In just an instant he half released her, the tears springing to his eyes. He looked at her almost in disbelief.

"Violet! Violet!" he murmured. "I—I am your father! I am Richard Bronson!"

XL

THE MYSTERY MIND

IN the interval of waiting for the attack of the head hunters, inflamed against Bronson by Evil Eye, there were questions, and explanations, and many tangled threads to be unraveled.

"When Doctor Sutton was compelled to leave me," Bronson concluded, finally, "he rightly thought I was dying. He had given me an antidote for the poison, but it seemed to be doing me no good. He could not wait any longer, because I had intrusted him with your baby self"—patting Violet's hand, resting in his—"and with the portrait of Stuart Steele, which was in reality the map to the treasure, and all my papers. The friendly natives were ready with their boat. It would have been fatal to delay."

"My mother—" suggested Violet, softly.

"I think it killed her to find she had given me the poison, even though she knew she was under the hypnotic influence of Steele. She had died that very morning; had been buried underneath a knoll within sight of the tent."

"And Steele—" This was from Dupont, sitting with Violet in the darkness of the cabin, listening to her father's narrative.

"He was seized by the hostile head hunters and carried off to be a sacrifice to their devil god at the very moment when the friendly blacks aided Doctor Sutton to escape to the lake and down the Orinoco to Angostura. Other tribesmen, sent by the chief Doctor Sutton had befriended, came to get my body, believing me dead and not wishing the head hunters to deprive me of decent burial. When they found I was still breathing they called in their medicine man. I don't know what sort of miracle he worked, but—well, here I am!"

"Father!" Violet was suddenly insistent. "Why did you stay away all these years? Why have you never come to America?"

Bronson sighed. "One of the natives tricked me. I guess he was influenced by fear of the devil worshipers. At any rate, he was the only one of the blacks to return, of those who went with Doctor Sutton. He reported that Sutton had been killed in the rapids, together with my baby, and that the portrait had been swept away by the river. I went down and across to Port of Spain until I regained my health. There was nothing but memories for me in the United States, so I crossed back to Venezuela and aided in the opening of many miles of rubber country. Al-

ways the thought of the treasure up here fascinated me. Finally I decided to return, to seek and find it alone. Without the map I have had no success."

Violet was silent, awed at this amazing recovery of a father. Dupont, seated with the two, wondered at the strange trick of fate which had kept them apart for nearly a score of years. Bronson himself probably thought of the wasted time, of the wealth of warm childish affection of which he had been deprived.

All at once Randolph interrupted the various reveries, calling from his post of observation at the door.

"Here they come!" he whispered, loudly. "They're crawling up!"

A moon well in its last quarter had risen high enough to cast a feeble light across the clearing, revealing from a dozen to two dozen moving shadows. Dupont and Randolph drew their revolvers, while Bronson grasped his rifle.

"They have no firearms," Bronson explained, "unless those who brought Violet up the river have modern weapons."

"Everything was lost in a lower rapids," she gasped, excitedly.

"Then wait until they're close; give them a volley; keep picking them off while they run back for shelter." For the moment, Bronson felt a return of youthful enthusiasm. "Give them a

hot enough reception and wild horses will never drag them back to bother us again."

It was slow waiting. In the dim light could be seen the glint of primitive iron-pointed spears. It was evident that some of the men carried a huge log to use as a battering ram against the door. The savages, with no idea that Bronson was ready for them, crawled up to the cabin and gathered about so as to rush in quickly, so as to seize him before he recovered from his surprise.

When they raised the log Bronson gave the word. Pistols and rifle spit out simultaneously. For several moments the savages paused, amazed, frightened, uncertain what to do. Then they broke and ran, back toward the stream and toward the shelter of the woods. In less than a minute it all was over. Randolph counted ten bodies immediately before the hut. They had been taken wholly unawares. It had been little better than a slaughter.

"Thank Heaven it's over!" exclaimed Dupont.

At that moment Violet screamed. Almost instantly Randolph wheeled, discharging his pistol. By the girl, quivering in the log behind her, was a poisoned spear. It had missed her hardly an inch. With slipping grasp and an audible groan the figure of a man crashed through the thatch of the roof where he had made an aperture to throw the spear, falling to the floor at her feet.

"Good thing I had one shot left," muttered

the adventurer, reloading his weapon in haste. "I'm going out to see if there 're any more about."

Dupont turned over the prone victim of Randolph's prompt marksmanship. Then he gasped with surprise. It was Renard, dead. Dropping to the side of the fox with sudden recollection, he tore away the rotting cloth of the man's clothes and found, as he hoped, the portrait of Steele. Without a word he handed it to Bronson.

Violet's father smoothed out the canvas, which had been bent and crumpled, water-soaked and subjected to every conceivable kind of mistreatment. A grunt escaped him. Taking a knife, he trimmed one edge evenly; after which he inserted the blade between the fibers. To the amazement of Dupont, the cloth in reality was two pieces pressed and glued together. Between them was a sheet of tissue paper, so fragile now that Bronson handled it only with the greatest difficulty. But this, placed over the face of Steele, still visible, indicated in rather graphic fashion, by the combination of its lines with the painting seen through from beneath, the secret route to the treasure. Violet was the first to understand.

"His head is the Cavern of the Skull, and this down by his coat is the entrance to the ravine, and—and it shows what it looks like so we can find it, and here—this flower in his buttonhole is the point of observation to get your direc-

tions." She clapped her hands. "Am I right, father?"

Bronson nodded, very proud of her.

They decided to start upon their search for the cavern and the treasure at noon. It was dawn by the time Randolph completed his survey of the surroundings. Bronson had arranged his own cot for Violet, while the men had arranged to sleep on the floor, taking turns in three shifts at guard. Randolph had insisted they be prepared, since Vera or Evil Eye, neither among the slain, might be expected to attack them. Dupont had been sure the priest and snake woman would hurry to the Cavern of the Skull, so that he was anxious to follow as quickly as possible.

Violet stole out, rather than sleeping at once, to wash herself. When she was through her hair was floating out, soft and yellow; and in khaki shirt and trousers of her father, and in Randolph's boots, the only ones small enough for her, she looked more than fit for Bronson's inspection by daylight. Randolph, meanwhile, nursed his sore feet and made shift with a pair of the prospector's boots, quite too large. By noon they were off.

The stream now led directly into the mountain pass. Towering peaks were directly before them, the first of which could be reached in a day's journey. The character of the ground changed, becoming rugged and rocky, although vegetation

persisted and although there were level, fertile spots at various points along the waterway.

After four grueling hours spent under the sun in a steady climb, they found the first sign of their quarry, the tiny print of a woman's foot in the sand at the side of a pool where she had leaned over to drink. Before they stopped at dusk to make a camp they discovered a bit of black cloth caught on a sharp point of rock where the path narrowed to a dangerous ledge. Finding a spot where an overhang of granite gave a degree of shelter, they stretched out for the night, sleeping without any attempt to keep or post a guard.

With the first light of dawn they nibbled at their dwindling food supply, which Bronson had been unable to replenish in the haste of their preparation, and pushed on. All day they followed a trail indicated now and then mostly by signs only visible to the alert Randolph.

Just at sunset they caught a sight of Vera silhouetted against the west. She was standing on a point of rock away from the water and to Randolph this indicated their destination. He pushed on ahead, the others compelled to follow more slowly. When Violet was lifted to the top of the shoulder of granite she glanced about, then pointed with sudden excitement to the lines on the map held by Bronson.

"This is the ravine! There it is on the map, and I remember it from my dream. When we

get down there we will see the Cavern of the Skull."

The descent was precipitous. Violet insisted upon leading the way, and once she fell and was caught by Dupont, immediately behind her. Finally they stood upon a narrow shelf. Below them was a fissure in the earth leading down to unknown depths. Across was a massive natural formation of stone. There was no mistaking it now. It was a gigantic skull!

The entrance to the cavern was reached around the ledge and by a leap of some three feet across the bottomless pit. At first it was impossible to see into the yawning blackness of the cave, but as their eyes became used to the gloom Randolph detected a prone figure near the entrance, and dropped to investigate.

"Good God!" The exclamation was spontaneous.

It was Evil Eye, his face revealed in all its gruesome horror. In his side protruded the handle of a knife. He lay in a pool of his own blood. Already his body was cold.

Dupont guessed it to be the work of Vera. As the hypnotist stood, hesitating, he suddenly recognized the distant sound of mocking laughter. It seemed to come closer, gradually, and he realized all at once that he was the only one to hear it. Then, out of the darkness, before his eyes there emerged, slowly and deliberately, an apparition,

and he grasped that the others saw it; that this phantom thing was visible to them all, while he alone could hear. It was the apparition which laughed, because he could see the movements of the lips. And, too, there was something familiar about the vaporous form of the man, a familiarity which baffled him.

"Stuart Steele!" gasped Bronson, drawing back.

"I am the Mystery Mind!" recited the phantom. "By my black arts I have held you all at bay and protected the treasure. Even now you have not won!"

The apparition faded, but the laughter continued to echo in Dupont's ears for many moments afterward.

The attention of all, however, was directed to the center of the cavern. Here a blue flame sprang up, becoming gradually brighter and whiter until the vast dome of rock was revealed with daylight brilliancy. Standing straight and erect, with the clean-limbed tenseness of a marble figure, was Vera. Her clothes, falling from her in tatters, revealed the beauty of her form in silhouette against the flame. Her eyes, blazing with the fire which burned within her mind, stood out more bright than all the glare about her. The snake woman, at the last, was hopelessly mad. In her hand was a round ball of gold. This she cast into the flame. A terrific explosion blotted out every-

thing, reverberating louder than any thunder in the narrow crevices of the ravine.

Dupont returned to consciousness before the others. None of the party was hurt. A rock had fallen upon the form of Evil Eye, however, while there was not the slightest trace of Vera. In the light of a smoldering fire, where the altar had stood, Dupont found a new hole in the wall and he stole forward cautiously to investigate. Beyond was a little room, unhurt by the upheaval, lighted by a dozen candles in a rude candelabrum. On the floor, piled like so much coal, was the treasure of the black priests of Atlantis—gold, silver, and countless precious stones. Seated on the pile, as though mutely to proclaim his ownership, was a man.

Dupont recognized him. It was Stuart Steele, master of the magic art of the voodoos.

The Mystery Mind had lost its earthly shell.

Steele was dead.

THE END

THE NOVELS OF
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

"K." Illustrated.

K. LeMoyne, famous surgeon, drops out of the world that has known him, and goes to live in a little town where beautiful Sidney Page lives. She is in training to become a nurse. The joys and troubles of their young love are told with that keen and sympathetic appreciation which has made the author famous.

THE MAN IN LOWER TEN.

Illustrated by Howard Chandler Christy.

An absorbing detective story woven around the mysterious death of the "Man in Lower Ten." The strongest elements of Mrs. Rinehart's success are found in this book.

WHEN A MAN MARRIES.

Illustrated by Harrison Fisher and Mayo Bunker.

A young artist, whose wife had recently divorced him, finds that his aunt is soon to visit him. The aunt, who contributes to the family income and who has never seen the wife, knows nothing of the domestic upheaval. How the young man met the situation is humorously and most entertainingly told.

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE. Illus. by Lester Ralph.

The summer occupants of "Sunnyside" find the dead body of Arnold Armstrong, the son of the owner, on the circular staircase. Following the murder a bank failure is announced. Around these two events is woven a plot of absorbing interest.

THE STREET OF SEVEN STARS.

Illustrated (Photo Play Edition.)

Harmony Wells, studying in Vienna to be a great violinist, suddenly realizes that her money is almost gone. She meets a young ambitious doctor who offers her chivalry and sympathy, and together with world-worn Dr. Anna and Jimmie, the waif, they share their love and slender means.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

NOVELS OF FRONTIER LIFE BY
WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

May be had wherever books are sold. ⁝ Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

MAVERICKS

A tale of the western frontier, where the "rustler" abounds. One of the sweetest love stories ever told.

A TEXAS RANGER

How a member of the border police saved the life of an innocent man, followed a fugitive to Wyoming, and then passed through deadly peril to ultimate happiness.

WYOMING

In this vivid story the author brings out the turbid life of the frontier with all its engaging dash and vigor.

RIDGWAY OF MONTANA

The scene is laid in the mining centers of Montana, where politics and mining industries are the religion of the country.

BUCKY O'CONNOR

Every chapter teems with wholesome, stirring adventures, replete with the dashing spirit of the border.

CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT

A story of Arizona; of swift-riding men and daring outlaws; of a bitter feud between cattle-men and sheep-herders.

BRAND BLOTTERS

A story of the turbid life of the frontier with a charming love interest running through its pages.

STEVE YEAGER

A story brimful of excitement, with enough gun-play and adventure to suit anyone.

A DAUGHTER OF THE DONS

A Western story of romance and adventure, comprising a vivacious and stirring tale.

THE HIGHGRADER

A breezy, pleasant and amusing love story of Western mining life.

THE PIRATE OF PANAMA

A tale of old-time pirates and of modern love, hate and adventure.

THE YUKON TRAIL

A crisply entertaining love story in the land where might makes right.

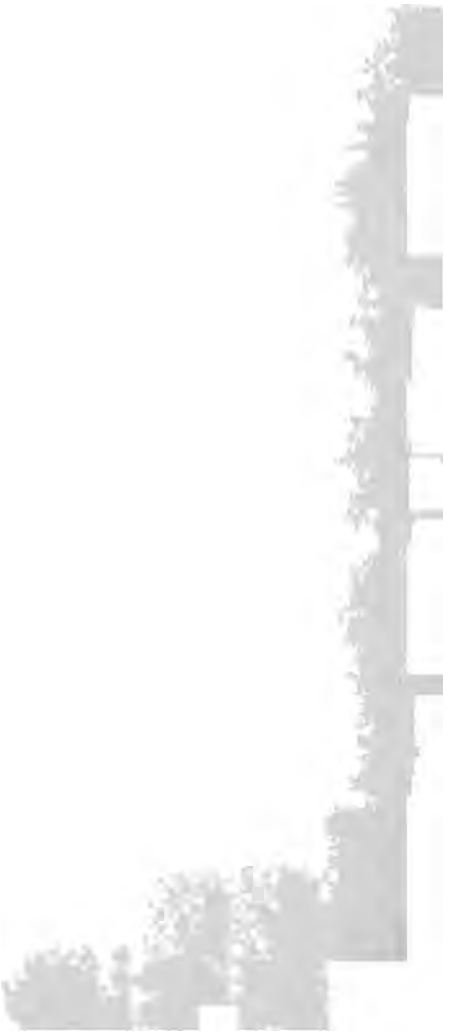
THE VISION SPLENDID

In which two cousins are contestants for the same prizes; political honors and the hand of a girl.

THE SHERIFF'S SON

The hero finally conquers both himself and his enemies and wins the love of a wonderful girl.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK



FEB 1 1 1941